

Public Domain Science Fiction Collection #2

From the pages of legendary Galaxy Magazine, 17 stories of the 1950's and early 60's, curated by Distributed Proofreaders and found on Project Gutenberg. Some are famous -- Leiber's *The Moon is Green* was dramatized for the old-time radio show, X Minus One (available in Archive's Old Time Radio section in Audio) in the late 50's, as was Phelps' *Merchants of Venus*. MacLean's *Snowball Effect*, also featured on the show, has recently been added to PG's catalog. Many of these stories have been recorded by myself and other volunteers at LibriVox free audio books, also located in Archive Audio.

(Compilation and summary by Matt Pierard)

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The Project Gutenberg EBook of Monkey On His Back, by Charles V. De Vet
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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MONKEY ON HIS BACK ***

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By CHARLES V. DE VET
monkey on his back

Under the cloud of cast-off identities
lay the shape of another man—
was it himself?
Illustrated by DILLON

HE was walking endlessly down a long, glass-walled corridor. Bright sunlight slanted in through one wall, on the blue knapsack across his shoulders. Who he was, and what he was doing here, was clouded. The truth lurked in some corner of his consciousness, but it was not reached by surface awareness.

The corridor opened at last into a large high-domed room, much like a railway station or an air terminal. He walked straight ahead.

At the sight of him a man leaning negligently against a stone pillar, to his right but within vision, straightened and barked an order to him, "Halt!" He lengthened his stride but gave no other sign.

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Two men hurried through a doorway of a small anteroom to his left, calling to him. He turned away and began to run.

Shouts and the sound of charging feet came from behind him. He cut to the right, running toward the escalator to the second floor. Another pair of men were hurrying down, two steps at a stride. With no break in pace he veered into an opening beside the escalator.

At the first turn he saw that the aisle merely circled the stairway, coming out into the depot again on the other side. It was a trap. He glanced quickly around him.

At the rear of the space was a row of lockers for traveler use. He slipped a coin into a pay slot, opened the zipper on his bag and pulled out a flat briefcase. It took him only a few seconds to push the case into the compartment, lock it and slide the key along the floor beneath the locker.

There was nothing to do after that—except wait.

The men pursuing him came hurtling around the turn in the aisle. He kicked his knapsack to one side, spreading his feet wide with an instinctive motion.

Until that instant he had intended to fight. Now he swiftly reassessed the odds. There were five of them, he saw. He should be able to incapacitate two or three and break out. But the fact that they had been expecting him meant that others would very probably be waiting outside. His best course now was to sham ignorance. He relaxed.

He offered no resistance as they reached him.

They were not gentle men. A tall ruffian, copper-brown face damp with perspiration and body oil, grabbed him by the jacket and slammed him back against the lockers. As he shifted his weight to keep his footing someone drove a fist into his face. He started to raise his hands; and a hard flat object crashed against the side of his skull.

The starch went out of his legs.

“DO you make anything out of it?” the psychoanalyst Milton Bergstrom, asked.

John Zarwell shook his head. “Did I talk while I was under?”

“Oh, yes. You were supposed to. That way I follow pretty well what you’re reenacting.”

“How does it tie in with what I told you before?”

Bergstrom’s neat-boned, fair-skinned face betrayed no emotion other than an introspective stillness of his normally alert gaze. “I see no connection,” he decided, his words once again precise and meticulous. “We don’t have enough to go on. Do you feel able to try another comanalysis this afternoon yet?”

“I don’t see why not.” Zarwell [p137] opened the collar of his shirt. The day was hot, and the room had no air conditioning, still a rare luxury on St. Martin’s. The office window was open, but it let in no freshness, only the mildly rank odor that pervaded all the planet’s habitable area.

“Good.” Bergstrom rose. “The serum is quite harmless, John.” He maintained a professional diversionary chatter as he administered the drug. “A scopolamine derivative that’s been well tested.”

The floor beneath Zarwell’s feet assumed abruptly the near transfluent consistency of a damp sponge. It rose in a foot-high wave and rolled gently toward the far wall.

Bergstrom continued talking, with practiced urbanity. “When psychiatry was a less exact science,” his voice went on, seeming to come from a great distance, “a doctor had to spend weeks, sometimes months or years

interviewing a patient. If he was skilled enough, he could sort the relevancies from the vast amount of chaff. We are able now, with the help of the serum, to confine our discourses to matters cogent to the patient's trouble."

The floor continued its transmutation, and Zarwell sank deep into viscous depths. "Lie back and relax. Don't ..."

The words tumbled down from above. They faded, were gone.

ZARWELL found himself standing on a vast plain. There was no sky above, and no horizon in the distance. He was in a place without space or dimension. There was nothing here except himself—and the gun that he held in his hand.

A weapon beautiful in its efficient simplicity.

He should know all about the instrument, its purpose and workings, but he could not bring his thoughts into rational focus. His forehead creased with his mental effort.

Abruptly the unreality about him shifted perspective. He was approaching—not walking, but merely shortening the space between them—the man who held the gun. The man who was himself. The other "himself" drifted nearer also, as though drawn by a mutual attraction.

The man with the gun raised his weapon and pressed the trigger.

With the action the perspective shifted again. He was watching the face of the man he shot jerk and twitch, expand and contract. The face was unharmed, yet it was no longer the same. No longer his own features.

The stranger face smiled approvingly at him.

"ODD," Bergstrom said. He brought his hands up and joined the tips of his fingers against his chest. "But it's another piece in the [p138] jig-saw. In time it will fit into place." He paused. "It means no more to you than the first, I suppose?"

"No," Zarwell answered.

He was not a talking man, Bergstrom reflected. It was more than reticence, however. The man had a hard granite core, only partially concealed by his present perplexity. He was a man who could handle himself well in an emergency.

Bergstrom shrugged, dismissing his strayed thoughts. "I expected as much. A quite normal first phase of treatment." He straightened a paper on his desk. "I think that will be enough for today. Twice in one sitting is about all we ever try. Otherwise some particular episode might cause undue mental stress, and set up a block." He glanced down at his appointment pad. "Tomorrow at two, then?"

Zarwell grunted acknowledgment and pushed himself to his feet, apparently unaware that his shirt clung damply to his body.

THE sun was still high when Zarwell left the analyst's office. The white marble of the city's buildings shimmered in the afternoon heat, squat and austere as giant tree trunks, pock-marked and gray-mottled with windows. Zarwell was careful not to rest his hand on the flesh searing surface of the stone.

The evening meal hour was approaching when he reached the Flats, on the way to his apartment. The streets of the old section were near-deserted. The only sounds he heard as he passed were the occasional cry of a baby, chronically uncomfortable in the day's heat, and the lowing of imported cattle waiting in a nearby shed to be shipped to the country.

All St. Martin's has a distinctive smell, as of an arid dried-out swamp, with a faint taint of fish. But in the Flats the odor changes. Here is the smell of factories, warehouses, and trading marts; the smell of stale cooking drifting

from the homes of the laborers and lower class techmen who live there.

Zarwell passed a group of smaller children playing a desultory game of lic-lic for pieces of candy and cigarettes. Slowly he climbed the stairs of a stone flat. He prepared a supper for himself and ate it without either enjoyment or distaste. He lay down, fully clothed, on his bed. The visit to the analyst had done nothing to dispel his ennui.

[p139]

sketch of faces with clenched fists

The next morning when Zarwell awoke he lay for a moment, unmoving. The feeling was there again, like a scene waiting only to be gazed at directly to be perceived. It was as though a great wisdom lay at the edge of understanding. If he rested quietly it would all come to him. Yet always, when his mind lost its sleep-induced [p140] lethargy, the moment of near understanding slipped away.

This morning, however, the sense of disorientation did not pass with full wakefulness. He achieved no understanding, but the strangeness did not leave as he sat up.

He gazed about him. The room did not seem to be his own. The furnishings, and the clothing he observed in a closet, might have belonged to a stranger.

He pulled himself from his blankets, his body moving with mechanical reaction. The slippers into which he put his feet were larger than he had expected them to be. He walked about the small apartment. The place was familiar, but only as it would have been if he had studied it from blueprints, not as though he lived there.

The feeling was still with him when he returned to the psychoanalyst.

THE scene this time was more kaleidoscopic, less personal.

A village was being ravaged. Men struggled and died in the streets. Zarwell moved among them, seldom taking part in the individual clashes, yet a moving force in the conflict.

The background changed. He understood that he was on a different world.

Here a city burned. Its resistance was nearing its end. Zarwell was riding a shaggy pony outside a high wall surrounding the stricken metropolis. He moved in and joined a party of short, bearded men, directing them as they battered at the wall with a huge log mounted on a many-wheeled truck.

The log broke a breach in the concrete and the besiegers charged through, carrying back the defenders who sought vainly to plug the gap. Soon there would be rioting in the streets again, plundering and killing.

Zarwell was not the leader of the invaders, only a lesser figure in the rebellion. But he had played a leading part in the planning of the strategy that led to the city's fall. The job had been well done.

Time passed, without visible break in the panorama. Now Zarwell was fleeing, pursued by the same bearded men who had been his comrades before. Still he moved with the same firm purpose, vigilant, resourceful, and well prepared for the eventuality that had befallen. He made his escape without difficulty.

He alighted from a space ship on still another world—another shift in time—and the atmosphere of conflict engulfed him.

Weary but resigned he accepted it, and did what he had to do ...

BERGSTROM was regarding him with speculative scrutiny. "You've had quite a past, apparently," he observed.

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Zarwell smiled with mild embarrassment. "At least in my dreams."

"Dreams?" Bergstrom's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, I beg your pardon. I must have forgotten to explain. This work is so routine to me that sometimes I forget it's all new to a patient. Actually what you experienced under the drug were not dreams. They were recollections of real episodes from your past."

Zarwell's expression became wary. He watched Bergstrom closely. After a minute, however, he seemed satisfied, and he let himself settle back against the cushion of his chair. "I remember nothing of what I saw," he observed.

"That's why you're here, you know," Bergstrom answered. "To help you remember."

"But everything under the drug is so ..."

"Haphazard? That's true. The recall episodes are always purely random, with no chronological sequence. Our problem will be to reassemble them in proper order later. Or some particular scene may trigger a complete memory return.

"It is my considered opinion," Bergstrom went on, "that your lost memory will turn out to be no ordinary amnesia. I believe we will find that your mind has been tampered with."

"Nothing I've seen under the drug fits into the past I do remember."

"That's what makes me so certain," Bergstrom said confidently. "You don't remember what we have shown to be true. Conversely then, what you think you remember must be false. It must have been implanted there. But we can go into that later. For today I think we have done enough. This episode was quite prolonged."

"I won't have any time off again until next week end," Zarwell reminded him.

"That's right." Bergstrom thought for a moment. "We shouldn't let this hang too long. Could you come here after work tomorrow?"

"I suppose I could."

"Fine," Bergstrom said with satisfaction. "I'll admit I'm considerably more than casually interested in your case by this time."

A WORK truck picked Zarwell up the next morning and he rode with a tech crew to the edge of the reclam area. Beside the belt bringing ocean muck from the converter plant at the seashore his bulldozer was waiting.

He took his place behind the drive wheel and began working dirt down between windbreakers anchored in the rock. Along a makeshift road into the badlands trucks brought crushed lime and phosphorus to supplement the ocean sediment. The progress of life from the sea to the land was a mechanical [p142] process of this growing world.

Nearly two hundred years ago, when Earth established a colony on St. Martin's, the land surface of the planet had been barren. Only its seas thrived with animal and vegetable life. The necessary machinery and technicians had been supplied by Earth, and the long struggle began to fit the world for human needs. When Zarwell arrived, six months before, the vitalized area already extended three hundred miles along the coast, and sixty miles inland. And every day the progress continued. A large percentage of the energy and resources of the world were devoted to that essential expansion.

The reclam crews filled and sodded the sterile rock, planted binding grasses, grain and trees, and diverted rivers to keep it fertile. When there were no rivers to divert they blasted out springs and lakes in the foothills to make their own. Biologists developed the necessary germ and insect life from what they found in the sea. Where that failed, they imported microorganisms from Earth.

Three rubber-tracked crawlers picked their way down from the mountains until they joined the road passing the belt. They were loaded with ore that would be smelted into metal for depleted Earth, or for other colonies short of minerals. It was St. Martin's only export thus far.

Zarwell pulled his sun helmet lower, to better guard his hot, dry features. The wind blew continuously on St. Martin's, but it furnished small relief from the heat. After its three-thousand-mile journey across scorched sterile rock, it sucked the moisture from a man's body, bringing a membrane-shrinking dryness to the nostrils as it was breathed in. With it came also the cloying taste of limestone in a worker's mouth.

Zarwell gazed idly about at the other laborers. Fully three-quarters of them were beri-rabza ridden. A cure for the skin fungus had not yet been found; the men's faces and hands were scabbed and red. The colony had grown to near self-sufficiency, would soon have a moderate prosperity, yet they still lacked adequate medical and research facilities.

Not all the world's citizens were content.

Bergstrom was waiting in his office when Zarwell arrived that evening.

HE was lying motionless on a hard cot, with his eyes closed, yet with his every sense sharply quickened. Tentatively he tightened small muscles in his arms and legs. Across his wrists and thighs he felt straps binding him to the cot.

"So that's our big, bad man," a coarse voice above him observed [p143] caustically. "He doesn't look so tough now, does he?"

"It might have been better to kill him right away," a second, less confident voice said. "It's supposed to be impossible to hold him."

"Don't be stupid. We just do what we're told. We'll hold him."

"What do you think they'll do with him?"

"Execute him, I suppose," the harsh voice said matter-of-factly. "They're probably just curious to see what he looks like first. They'll be disappointed."

Zarwell opened his eyes a slit to observe his surroundings.

It was a mistake. "He's out of it," the first speaker said, and Zarwell allowed his eyes to open fully.

The voice, he saw, belonged to the big man who had bruised him against the locker at the spaceport. Irrelevantly he wondered how he knew now that it had been a spaceport.

His captor's broad face jeered down at Zarwell. "Have a good sleep?" he asked with mock solicitude. Zarwell did not deign to acknowledge that he heard.

The big man turned. "You can tell the Chief he's awake," he said. Zarwell followed his gaze to where a younger man, with a blond lock of hair on his forehead, stood behind him. The youth nodded and went out, while the other pulled a chair up to the side of Zarwell's cot.

While their attention was away from him Zarwell had unobtrusively loosened his bonds as much as possible with arm leverage. As the big man drew his chair nearer, he made the hand farthest from him tight and compact and worked it free of the leather loop. He waited.

The big man belched. "You're supposed to be great stuff in a situation like this," he said, his smoke-tan face splitting in a grin that revealed large square teeth. "How about giving me a sample?"

"You're a yellow-livered bastard," Zarwell told him.

The grin faded from the oily face as the man stood up. He leaned over the cot—and Zarwell's left hand shot up and locked about his throat, joined almost immediately by the right.

The man's mouth opened and he tried to yell as he threw himself frantically backward. He clawed at the hands about his neck. When that failed to break the grip he suddenly reversed his weight and drove his fist at Zarwell's head.

Zarwell pulled the struggling body down against his chest and held it there until all agitated movement ceased. He sat up then, letting the body slide to the floor.

The straps about his thighs came loose with little effort.

THE analyst dabbed at his upper lip with a handkerchief. "The episodes are beginning to tie together," he said, with an attempt at [p144] nonchalance. "The next couple should do it."

Zarwell did not answer. His memory seemed on the point of complete return, and he sat quietly, hopefully. However, nothing more came and he returned his attention to his more immediate problem.

Opening a button on his shirt, he pulled back a strip of plastic cloth just below his rib cage and took out a small flat pistol. He held it in the palm of his hand. He knew now why he always carried it.

Bergstrom had his bad moment. "You're not going to ..." he began at the sight of the gun. He tried again. "You must be joking."

"I have very little sense of humor," Zarwell corrected him.

"You'd be foolish!"

Bergstrom obviously realized how close he was to death. Yet surprisingly, after the first start, he showed little fear. Zarwell had thought the man a bit soft, too adjusted to a life of ease and some prestige to meet danger calmly. Curiosity restrained his trigger finger.

"Why would I be foolish?" he asked. "Your Meninger oath of inviolable confidence?"

Bergstrom shook his head. "I know it's been broken before. But you need me. You're not through, you know. If you killed me you'd still have to trust some other analyst."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"No." Bergstrom was angry now. "But use that logical mind you're supposed to have! Scenes before this have shown what kind of man you are. Just because this last happened here on St. Martin's makes little difference. If I was going to turn you in to the police, I'd have done it before this."

Zarwell debated with himself the truth of what the other had said. "Why didn't you turn me in?" he asked.

"Because you're no mad-dog killer!" Now that the crisis seemed to be past, Bergstrom spoke more calmly, even allowed himself to relax. "You're still pretty much in the fog about yourself. I read more in those comanalyses than you did. I even know who you are!"

Zarwell's eyebrows raised.

"Who am I?" he asked, very interested now. Without attention he put his pistol away in a trouser pocket.

Bergstrom brushed the question aside with one hand. "Your name makes little difference. You've used many. But you are an idealist. Your killings were necessary to bring justice to the places you visited. By now you're almost a legend among the human worlds. I'd like to talk more with you on that later."

While Zarwell considered, Bergstrom pressed his advantage. "One more scene might do it," he said. "Should we try again—if you trust me, that is?"

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Zarwell made his decision quickly. "Go ahead," he answered.

ALL Zarwell's attention seemed on the cigar he lit as he rode down the escalator, but he surveyed the terminal carefully over the rim of his hand. He spied no suspicious loungers.

Behind the escalator he groped along the floor beneath the lockers until he found his key. The briefcase was under his arm a minute later.

In the basement lav he put a coin in the pay slot of a private compartment and went in.

As he zipped open the briefcase he surveyed his features in the mirror. A small muscle at the corner of one eye twitched spasmodically. One cheek wore a frozen quarter smile. Thirty-six hours under the paralysis was longer than advisable. The muscles should be rested at least every twenty hours.

Fortunately his natural features would serve as an adequate disguise now.

He adjusted the ring setting on the pistol-shaped instrument that he took from his case, and carefully rayed several small areas of his face, loosening muscles that had been tight too long. He sighed gratefully when he finished, massaging his cheeks and forehead with considerable pleasure. Another glance in the mirror satisfied him with the changes that had been made. He turned to his briefcase again and exchanged the gun for a small syringe, which he pushed into a trouser pocket, and a single-edged razor blade.

Removing his fiber-cloth jacket he slashed it into strips with the razor blade and flushed it down the disposal bowl. With the sleeves of his blouse rolled up he had the appearance of a typical workman as he strolled from the compartment.

Back at the locker he replaced the briefcase and, with a wad of gum, glued the key to the bottom of the locker frame.

One step more. Taking the syringe from his pocket, he plunged the needle into his forearm and tossed the instrument down a waste chute. He took three more steps and paused uncertainly.

When he looked about him it was with the expression of a man waking from a vivid dream.

"QUITE ingenious," Graves murmured admiringly. "You had your mind already preconditioned for the shot. But why would you deliberately give yourself amnesia?"

"What better disguise than to believe the part you're playing?"

"A good man must have done that job on your mind," Bergstrom commented. "I'd have hesitated to try it myself. It must have taken a lot of trust on your part."

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"Trust and money," Zarwell said drily.

"Your memory's back then?"

Zarwell nodded.

"I'm glad to hear that," Bergstrom assured him. "Now that you're well again I'd like to introduce you to a man named Vernon Johnson. This world ..."

Zarwell stopped him with an upraised hand. "Good God, man, can't you see the reason for all this? I'm tired. I'm trying to quit."

"Quit?" Bergstrom did not quite follow him.

"It started on my home colony," Zarwell explained listlessly. "A gang of hoods had taken over the government. I helped organize a movement to get them out. There was some bloodshed, but it went quite well. Several months later an unofficial envoy from another world asked several of us to give them a hand on the same kind of job. The political conditions there were rotten. We went with him. Again we were successful. It seems I have a kind of genius for that sort of thing."

He stretched out his legs and regarded them thoughtfully. "I learned then the truth of Russell's saying: 'When the oppressed win their freedom they are as oppressive as their former masters.' When they went bad, I opposed them. This time I failed. But I escaped again. I have quite a talent for that also."

"I'm not a professional do-gooder," Zarwell's tone appealed to Bergstrom for understanding. "I have only a normal man's indignation at injustice. And now I've done my share. Yet, wherever I go, the word eventually gets out, and I'm right back in a fight again. It's like the proverbial monkey on my back. I can't get rid of it."

He rose. "That disguise and memory planting were supposed to get me out of it. I should have known it wouldn't work. But this time I'm not going to be drawn back in! You and your Vernon Johnson can do your own revolting. I'm through!"

Bergstrom did not argue as he left.

RESTLESSNESS drove Zarwell from his flat the next day—a legal holiday on St. Martin's. At a railed-off lot he stopped and loitered in the shadow of an adjacent building watching workmen drilling an excavation for a new structure.

When a man strolled to his side and stood watching the workmen, he was not surprised. He waited for the other to speak.

"I'd like to talk to you, if you can spare a few minutes," the stranger said.

Zarwell turned and studied the man without answering. He was medium tall, with the body of an athlete, though perhaps ten years [p147] beyond the age of sports. He had a manner of contained energy. "You're Johnson?" he asked.

The man nodded.

Zarwell tried to feel the anger he wanted to feel, but somehow it would not come. "We have nothing to talk about," was the best he could manage.

"Then will you just listen? After, I'll leave—if you tell me to."

Against his will he found himself liking the man, and wanting at least to be courteous. He inclined his head toward a curb wastebbox with a flat top. "Should we sit?"

Johnson smiled agreeably and they walked over to the box and sat down.

"When this colony was first founded," Johnson began without preamble, "the administrative body was a governor, and a council of twelve. Their successors were to be elected biennially. At first they were. Then things changed. We haven't had an election now in the last twenty-three years. St. Martin's is beginning to prosper. Yet the only ones receiving the benefits are the rulers. The citizens work twelve hours a day. They are poorly housed, poorly fed, poorly clothed. They ..."

Zarwell found himself not listening as Johnson's voice went on. The story was always the same. But why did they always try to drag him into their troubles?

Why hadn't he chosen some other world on which to hide?

The last question prompted a new thought. Just why had he chosen St. Martin's? Was it only a coincidence? Or had he, subconsciously at least, picked this particular world? He had always considered himself the unwilling

subject of glib persuaders ... but mightn't some inner compulsion of his own have put the monkey on his back?

"... and we need your help." Johnson had finished his speech.

Zarwell gazed up at the bright sky. He pulled in a long breath, and let it out in a sigh.

"What are your plans so far?" he asked wearily.

—CHARLES V. DE VET

The Project Gutenberg EBook of A City Near Centaurus, by Bill Doede

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A CITY NEAR CENTAURUS ***

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A CITY NEAR CENTAURUS

By BILL DOEDE

Illustrated by WEST

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The city was sacred, but not to its gods.
Michaelson was a god--but far from sacred!

Crouched in the ancient doorway like an animal peering out from his
burrow, Mr. Michaelson saw the native.

At first he was startled, thinking it might be someone else from the Earth settlement who had discovered the old city before him. Then he saw the glint of sun against the metallic skirt, and relaxed.

He chuckled to himself, wondering with amusement what a webfooted man was doing in an old dead city so far from his people. Some facts were known about the people of Alpha Centaurus II. They were not actually natives, he recalled. They were a colony from the fifth planet of the system. They were a curious people. Some were highly intelligent, though uneducated.

He decided to ignore the man for the moment. He was far down the ancient street, a mere speck against the sand. There would be plenty of time to wonder about him.

He gazed out from his position at the complex variety of buildings before him. Some were small, obviously homes. Others were huge with tall, frail spires standing against the pale blue sky. Square buildings, ellipsoid, spheroid. Beautiful, dream-stuff bridges connected tall, conical towers, bridges that still swung in the wind after half a million years. Late afternoon sunlight shone against ebony surfaces. The sands of many centuries had blown down the wide streets and filled the doorways. Desert plants grew from roofs of smaller buildings.

Ignoring the native, Mr. Michaelson poked about among the ruins happily, exclaiming to himself about some particular artifact, marveling at its state of preservation, holding it this way and that to catch the late afternoon sun, smiling, clucking gleefully. He crawled over the rubble through old doorways half filled with the accumulation of ages. He dug experimentally in the sand with his hands, like a dog, under a roof that had weathered half a million years of rain and sun. Then he crawled out again, covered with dust and cobwebs.

* * * * *

The native stood in the street less than a hundred feet away, waving his arms madly. "Mr. Earthgod," he cried. "It is sacred ground where you are trespassing!"

The archeologist smiled, watching the man hurry closer. He was short, even for a native. Long gray hair hung to his shoulders, bobbing up and down as he walked. He wore no shoes. The toes of his webbed feet dragged in the sand, making a deep trail behind him. He was an old man.

"You never told us about this old dead city," Michaelson said, chidingly. "Shame on you. But never mind. I've found it now. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes, beautiful. You will leave now."

"Leave?" Michaelson asked, acting surprised as if the man were a child. "I just got here a few hours ago."

"You must go."

"Why? Who are you?"

"I am keeper of the city."

"You?" Michaelson laughed. Then, seeing how serious the native was, said, "What makes you think a dead city needs a keeper?"

"The spirits may return."

Michaelson crawled out of the doorway and stood up. He brushed his trousers. He pointed. "See that wall? Built of some metal, I'd say, some alloy impervious to rust and wear."

"The spirits are angry."

"Notice the inscriptions? Wind has blown sand against them for eons, and rain and sleet. But their story is there, once we decipher it."

"Leave!"

The native's lined, weathered old face was working around the mouth in anger. Michaelson was almost sorry he had mocked him. He was deadly serious.

"Look," he said. "No spirits are ever coming back here. Don't you know that? And even if they did, spirits care nothing for old cities half covered with sand and dirt."

He walked away from the old man, heading for another building. The sun had already gone below the horizon, coloring the high clouds. He glanced backward. The webfoot was following.

"Mr. Earthgod!" the webfoot cried, so sharply that Michaelson stopped. "You must not touch, not walk upon, not handle. Your step may destroy the home of some ancient spirit. Your breath may cause one iota of change and a spirit may lose his way in the darkness. Go quickly now, or be killed."

* * * * *

He turned and walked off, not looking back.

Michaelson stood in the ancient street, tall, gaunt, feet planted wide, hands in pockets, watching the webfoot until he was out of sight beyond a huge circular building. There was a man to watch. There was one of the intelligent ones. One look into the alert old eyes had told him that.

Michaelson shook his head, and went about satisfying his curiosity. He entered buildings without thought of roofs falling in, or decayed floors dropping from under his weight. He began to collect small items, making a pile of them in the street. An ancient bowl, metal untouched by the ages. A statue of a man, one foot high, correct to the minutest detail, showing how identical they had been to Earthmen. He found books still standing on ancient shelves but was afraid to touch them without tools.

Darkness came swiftly and he was forced out into the street.

He stood there alone feeling the age of the place. Even the smell of age was in the air. Silver moonlight from the two moons filtered through clear air down upon the ruins. The city lay now in darkness,

dead and still, waiting for morning so it could lie dead and still in the sun.

There was no hurry to be going home, although he was alone, although this was Alpha Centaurus II with many unknowns, many dangers ... although home was a very great distance away. There was no one back there to worry about him.

His wife had died many years ago back on Earth. No children. His friends in the settlement would not look for him for another day at least. Anyway, the tiny cylinder, buried in flesh behind his ear, a thing of mystery and immense power, could take him home instantly, without effort save a flicker of thought.

"You did not leave, as I asked you."

Michaelson whirled around at the sound of the native's voice. Then he relaxed. He said, "You shouldn't sneak up on a man like that."

"You must leave, or I will be forced to kill you. I do not want to kill you, but if I must..." He made a clucking sound deep in the throat. "The spirits are angry."

"Nonsense. Superstition! But never mind. You have been here longer than I. Tell me, what are those instruments in the rooms? It looks like a clock but I'm certain it had some other function."

"What rooms?"

"Oh, come now. The small rooms back there. Look like they were bedrooms."

"I do not know." The webfoot drew closer. Michaelson decided he was sixty or seventy years old, at least.

"You've been here a long time. You are intelligent, and you must be educated, the way you talk. That gadget looks like a time-piece of some sort. What is it? What does it measure?"

"I insist that you go." The webfoot held something in his hand.

"No." Michaelson looked off down the street, trying to ignore the native, trying to feel the life of the city as it might have been.

* * * * *

"You are sensitive," the native said in his ear. "It takes a sensitive god to feel the spirits moving in the houses and walking in these old streets."

"Say it any way you want to. This is the most fascinating thing I've ever seen. The Inca's treasure, the ruins of Pompeii, Egyptian tombs--none can hold a candle to this."

"Mr. Earthgod..."

"Don't call me that. I'm not a god, and you know it."

The old man shrugged. "It is not an item worthy of dispute. Those names

you mention, are they the names of gods?"

He chuckled. "In a way, yes. What is your name?"

"Maota."

"You must help me, Maota. These things must be preserved. We'll build a museum, right here in the street. No, over there on the hill just outside the city. We'll collect all the old writings and perhaps we may decipher them. Think of it, Maota! To read pages written so long ago and think their thoughts. We'll put everything under glass. Build and evacuate chambers to stop the decay. Catalogue, itemize...."

Michaelson was warming up to his subject, but Maota shook his head like a waving palm frond and stamped his feet.

"You will leave now."

"Can't you see? Look at the decay. These things are priceless. They must be preserved. Future generations will thank us."

"Do you mean," the old man asked, aghast, "that you want others to come here? You know the city abhors the sound of alien voices. Those who lived here may return one day! They must not find their city packaged and preserved and laid out on shelves for the curious to breathe their foul breaths upon. You will leave. Now!"

"No." Michaelson was adamant. The rock of Gibraltar.

Maota hit him, quickly, passionately, and dropped the weapon beside his body. He turned swiftly, making a swirling mark in the sand with his heel, and walked off toward the hills outside the city.

The weapon he had used was an ancient book. Its paper-thin pages rustled in the wind as if an unseen hand turned them, reading, while Michaelson's blood trickled out from the head wound upon the ancient street.

* * * * *

When he regained consciousness the two moons, bright sentinel orbs in the night sky, had moved to a new position down their sliding path. Old Maota's absence took some of the weirdness and fantasy away. It seemed a more practical place now.

The gash in his head was painful, throbbing with quick, short hammer-blows synchronized with his heart beats. But there was a new determination in him. If it was a fight that the old webfooted fool wanted, a fight he would get. The cylinder flicked him, at his command, across five hundred miles of desert and rocks to a small creek he remembered. Here he bathed his head in cool water until all the caked blood was dissolved from his hair. Feeling better, he went back.

The wind had turned cool. Michaelson shivered, wishing he had brought a coat. The city was absolutely still except for small gusts of wind sighing through the frail spires. The ancient book still lay in the sand beside the dark spot of blood. He stooped over and picked it up.

It was light, much lighter than most Earth books. He ran a hand over

the binding. Smooth it was, untouched by time or climate. He squinted at the pages, tilting the book to catch the bright moonlight, but the writing was alien. He touched the page, ran his forefinger over the writing.

Suddenly he sprang back. The book fell from his hands.

"God in heaven!" he exclaimed.

He had heard a voice. He looked around at the old buildings, down the length of the ancient street. Something strange about the voice. Not Maota. Not his tones. Not his words. Satisfied that no one was near, he stooped and picked up the book again.

"Good God!" he said aloud. It was the book talking. His fingers had touched the writing again. It was not a voice, exactly, but a stirring in his mind, like a strange language heard for the first time.

A talking book. What other surprises were in the city? Tall, fragile buildings laughing at time and weather. A clock measuring God-knows-what. If such wonders remained, what about those already destroyed? One could only guess at the machines, the gadgets, the artistry already decayed and blown away to mix forever with the sand.

I must preserve it, he thought, whether Maota likes it or not. They say these people lived half a million years ago. A long time. Let's see, now. A man lives one hundred years on the average. Five thousand lifetimes.

And all you do is touch a book, and a voice jumps across all those years!

He started off toward the tall building he had examined upon discovery of the city. His left eyelid began to twitch and he laid his forefinger against the eye, pressing until it stopped. Then he stooped and entered the building. He laid the book down and tried to take the "clock" off the wall. It was dark in the building and his fingers felt along the wall, looking for it. Then he touched it. His fingers moved over its smooth surface. Then suddenly he jerked his hand back with an exclamation of amazement. Fear ran up his spine.

The clock was warm.

He felt like running, like flicking back to the settlement where there were people and familiar voices, for here was a thing that should not be. Half a million years--and here was warmth!

He touched it again, curiosity overwhelming his fear. It was warm. No mistake. And there was a faint vibration, a suggestion of power. He stood there in the darkness staring off into the darkness, trembling. Fear built up in him until it was a monstrous thing, drowning reason. He forgot the power of the cylinder behind his ear. He scrambled through the doorway. He got up and ran down the ancient sandy street until he came to the edge of the city. Here he stopped, gasping for air, feeling the pain throb in his head.

Common sense said that he should go home, that nothing worthwhile could be accomplished at night, that he was tired, that he was weak from loss of blood and fright and running. But when Michaelson was on the trail

of important discoveries he had no common sense.

He sat down in the darkness, meaning to rest a moment.

* * * * *

When he awoke dawn was red against thin clouds in the east.

Old Maota stood in the street with webbed feet planted far apart in the sand, a weapon in the crook of his arm. It was a long tube affair, familiar to Michaelson.

Michaelson asked, "Did you sleep well?"

"No."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"How do you feel?"

"Fine, but my head aches a little."

"Sorry," Maota said.

"For what?"

"For hitting you. Pain is not for gods like you."

Michaelson relaxed somewhat. "What kind of man are you? First you try to break my skull, then you apologize."

"I abhor pain. I should have killed you outright."

He thought about that for a moment, eyeing the weapon.

It looked in good working order. Slim and shiny and innocent, it looked like a glorified African blowgun. But he was not deceived by its appearance. It was a deadly weapon.

"Well," he said, "before you kill me, tell me about the book." He held it up for Maota to see.

"What about the book?"

"What kind of book is it?"

"What does Mr. Earthgod mean, what _kind_ of book? You have seen it. It is like any other book, except for the material and the fact that it talks."

"No, no. I mean, what's in it?"

"Poetry."

"Poetry? For God's sake, why poetry? Why not mathematics or history? Why not tell how to make the metal of the book itself? Now there is a subject worthy of a book."

Maota shook his head. "One does not study a dead culture to learn how

they made things, but how they thought. But we are wasting time. I must kill you now, so I can get some rest."

The old man raised the gun.

* * * * *

"Wait! You forget that I also have a weapon." He pointed to the spot behind his ear where the cylinder was buried. "I can move faster than you can fire the gun."

Maota nodded. "I have heard how you travel. It does not matter. I will kill you anyway."

"I suggest we negotiate."

"No."

"Why not?"

Maota looked off toward the hills, old eyes filmed from years of sand and wind, leather skin lined and pitted. The hills stood immobile, brown-gray, already shimmering with heat, impotent.

"Why not?" Michaelson repeated.

"Why not what?" Maota dragged his eyes back.

"Negotiate."

"No." Maota's eyes grew hard as steel. They stood there in the sun, not twenty feet apart, hating each other. The two moons, very pale and far away on the western horizon, stared like two bottomless eyes.

"All right, then. At least it's a quick death. I hear that thing just disintegrates a man. Pfft! And that's that."

Michaelson prepared himself to move if the old man's finger slid closer toward the firing stud. The old man raised the gun.

"Wait!"

"Now what?"

"At least read some of the book to me before I die, then."

The gun wavered. "I am not an unreasonable man," the webfoot said.

Michaelson stepped forward, extending his arm with the book.

"No, stay where you are. Throw it."

"This book is priceless. You just don't go throwing such valuable items around."

"It won't break. Throw it."

Michaelson threw the book. It landed at Maota's feet, spouting sand against his leg. He shifted the weapon, picked up the book and leafed

through it, raising his head in a listening attitude, searching for a suitable passage. Michaelson heard the thin, metallic pages rustle softly. He could have jumped and seized the weapon at that moment, but his desire to hear the book was strong.

* * * * *

Old Maota read, Michaelson listened. The cadence was different, the syntax confusing. But the thoughts were there. It might have been a professor back on Earth reading to his students. Keats, Shelley, Browning. These people were human, with human thoughts and aspirations.

The old man stopped reading. He squatted slowly, keeping Michaelson in sight, and laid the book face up in the sand. Wind moved the pages.

"See?" he said. "The spirits read. They must have been great readers, these people. They drink the book, as if it were an elixir. See how gentle! They lap at the pages like a new kitten tasting milk."

Michaelson laughed. "You certainly have an imagination."

"What difference does it make?" Maota cried, suddenly angry. "You want to close up all these things in boxes for a posterity who may have no slightest feeling or appreciation. I want to leave the city as it is, for spirits whose existence I cannot prove."

The old man's eyes were furious now, deadly. The gun came down directly in line with the Earthman's chest. The gnarled finger moved.

Michaelson, using the power of the cylinder behind his ear, jumped behind the old webfoot. To Maota it seemed that he had flicked out of existence like a match blown out. The next instant Michaelson spun him around and hit him. It was an inexperienced fist, belonging to an archeologist, not a fighter. But Maota was an old man.

He dropped in the sand, momentarily stunned. Michaelson bent over to pick up the gun and the old man, feeling it slip from his fingers, hung on and was pulled to his feet.

They struggled for possession of the gun, silently, gasping, kicking sand. Faces grew red. Lips drew back over Michaelson's white teeth, over Maota's pink, toothless gums. The dead city's fragile spires threw impersonal shadows down where they fought.

Then quite suddenly a finger or hand--neither knew whose finger or hand--touched the firing stud.

There was a hollow, whooshing sound. Both stopped still, realizing the total destruction they might have caused.

"It only hit the ground," Michaelson said.

A black, charred hole, two feet in diameter and--they could not see how deep--stared at them.

Maota let go and sprawled in the sand. "The book!" he cried. "The book is gone!"

"No! We probably covered it with sand while we fought."

* * * * *

Both men began scooping sand in their cupped hands, digging frantically for the book. Saliva dripped from Maota's mouth, but he didn't know or care.

Finally they stopped, exhausted. They had covered a substantial area around the hole. They had covered the complete area where they had been.

"We killed it," the old man moaned.

"It was just a book. Not alive, you know."

"How do you know?" The old man's pale eyes were filled with tears. "It talked and it sang. In a way, it had a soul. Sometimes on long nights I used to imagine it loved me, for taking care of it."

"There are other books. We'll get another."

Maota shook his head. "There are no more."

"But I've seen them. Down there in the square building."

"Not poetry. Books, yes, but not poetry. That was the only book with songs."

"I'm sorry."

"_You_ killed it!" Maota suddenly sprang for the weapon, lying forgotten in the sand. Michaelson put his foot on it and Maota was too weak to tear it loose. He could only weep out his rage.

When he could talk again, Maota said, "I am sorry, Mr. Earthgod. I've disgraced myself."

"Don't be sorry." Michaelson helped him to his feet. "We fight for some reasons, cry for others. A priceless book is a good reason for either."

"Not for that. For not winning. I should have killed you last night when I had the chance. The gods give us chances and if we don't take them we lose forever."

"I told you before! We are on the same side. Negotiate. Have you never heard of negotiation?"

"You are a god," Maota said. "One does not negotiate with gods. One either loves them, or kills them."

"That's another thing. I am not a god. Can't you understand?"

"Of course you are." Maota looked up, very sure. "Mortals cannot step from star to star like crossing a shallow brook."

"No, no. I don't step from one star to another. An invention does that. Just an invention. I carry it with me. It's a tiny thing. No one would ever guess it has such power. So you see, I'm human, just like you. Hit me and I hurt. Cut me and I bleed. I love. I hate. I was born. Some day I'll die. See? I'm human. Just a human with a machine. No more than

that."

* * * * *

Maota laughed, then sobered quickly. "You lie."

"No."

"If I had this machine, could I travel as you?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll kill you and take yours."

"It would not work for you."

"Why?"

"Each machine is tailored for each person."

The old man hung his head. He looked down into the black, charred hole. He walked all around the hole. He kicked at the sand, looking half-heartedly again for the book.

"Look," Michaelson said. "I'm sure I've convinced you that I'm human. Why not have a try at negotiating our differences?"

He looked up. His expressive eyes, deep, resigned, studied Michaelson's face. Finally he shook his head sadly. "When we first met I hoped we could think the ancient thoughts together. But our paths diverge. We have finished, you and I."

He turned and started off, shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Michaelson caught up to him. "Are you leaving the city?"

"No."

"Where are you going?"

"Away. Far away." Maota looked off toward the hills, eyes distant.

"Don't be stupid, old man. How can you go far away and not leave the city?"

"There are many directions. You would not understand."

"East. West. North. South. Up. Down."

"No, no. There is another direction. Come, if you must see."

Michaelson followed him far down the street. They came to a section of the city he had not seen before. Buildings were smaller, spires dwarfed against larger structures. Here a path was packed in the sand, leading to a particular building.

Michaelson said, "This is where you live?"

"Yes."

Maota went inside. Michaelson stood in the entrance and looked around. The room was clean, furnished with hand made chairs and a bed. Who is this old man, he thought, far from his people, living alone, choosing a life of solitude among ancient ruins but not touching them? Above the bed a "clock" was fastened to the wall, Michaelson remembered his fright--thinking of the warmth where warmth should not be.

Maota pointed to it.

"You asked about this machine," he said. "Now I will tell you." He laid his hand against it. "Here is power to follow another direction."

* * * * *

Michaelson tested one of the chairs to see if it would hold his weight, then sat down. His curiosity about the instrument was colossal, but he forced a short laugh. "Maota, you are complex. Why not stop all this mystery nonsense and tell me about it? You know more about it than I."

"Of course." Maota smiled a toothless, superior smile. "What do you suppose happened to this race?"

"You tell me."

"They took the unknown direction. The books speak of it. I don't know how the instrument works, but one thing is certain. The race did not die out, as a species becomes extinct."

Michaelson was amused, but interested. "Something like a fourth dimension?"

"I don't know. I only know that with this instrument there is no death. I have read the books that speak of this race, this wonderful people who conquered all disease, who explored all the mysteries of science, who devised this machine to cheat death. See this button here on the face of the instrument? Press the button, and...."

"And what?"

"I don't know, exactly. But I have lived many years. I have walked the streets of this city and wondered, and wanted to press the button. Now I will do so."

Quickly the old man, still smiling, pressed the button. A high-pitched whine filled the air, just within audio range. Steady for a moment, it then rose in pitch passing beyond hearing quickly.

The old man's knees buckled. He sank down, fell over the bed, lay still. Michaelson touched him cautiously, then examined him more carefully. No question about it.

The old man was dead.

* * * * *

Feeling depressed and alone, Michaelson found a desert knoll outside the city overlooking the tall spires that shone in the sunlight and gleamed in the moonlight. He made a stretcher, rolled the old man's

body on to it and dragged it down the long ancient street and up the knoll.

Here he buried him.

But it seemed a waste of time. Somehow he knew beyond any doubt that the old native and his body were completely disassociated in some sense more complete than death.

In the days that followed he gave much thought to the "clock." He came to the city every day. He spent long hours in the huge square building with the books. He learned the language by sheer bulldog determination. Then he searched the books for information about the instrument.

Finally after many weeks, long after the winds had obliterated all evidence of Maota's grave on the knoll, Michaelson made a decision. He had to know if the machine would work for him.

And so one afternoon when the ancient spires threw long shadows over the sand he walked down the long street and entered the old man's house. He stood before the instrument, trembling, afraid, but determined. He pinched his eyes shut tight like a child and pressed the button.

The high-pitched whine started.

Complete, utter silence. Void. Darkness. Awareness and memory, yes; nothing else. Then Maota's chuckle came. No sound, an impression only like the voice from the ancient book. Where was he? There was no left or right, up or down. Maota was everywhere, nowhere.

"Look!" Maota's thought was directed at him in this place of no direction. "Think of the city and you will see it."

Michaelson did, and he saw the city beyond, as if he were looking through a window. And yet he was in the city looking at his own body.

Maota's chuckle again. "The city will remain as it is. You did not win after all."

"Neither did you."

"But this existence has compensations," Maota said. "You can be anywhere, see anywhere on this planet. Even on your Earth."

Michaelson felt a great sadness, seeing his body lying across the old, home made bed. He looked closer. He sensed a vibration or life force--he didn't stop to define it--in his body. Why was his dead body different from Old Maota's? Could it be that there was some thread stretching from the reality of his body to his present state?

"I don't like your thoughts," Maota said. "No one can go back. I tried. I have discussed it with many who are not presently in communication with you. No one can go back."

Michaelson decided he try.

* * * * *

"No!" Maota's thought was prickled with fear and anger.

Michaelson did not know how to try, but he remembered the cylinder and gathered all the force of his mind in spite of Maota's protests, and gave his most violent command.

At first he thought it didn't work. He got up and looked around, then it struck him. _He was standing up!_

The cylinder. He knew it was the cylinder. That was the difference between himself and Maota. When he used the cylinder, that was where he went, the place where Maota was now. It was a door of some kind, leading to a path of some kind where distance was non-existent. But the "clock" was a mechanism to transport only the mind to that place.

To be certain of it, he pressed the button again, with the same result as before. He saw his own body fall down. He felt Maota's presence.

"You devil!" Maota's thought-scream was a sword of hate and anger, irrational suddenly, like a person who knows his loss is irrevocable.

"I said you were a god. I said you were a god. _I said you were a god...!_"

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BACKLASH

By WINSTON MARKS

Illustrated by SIBLEY

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[Sidenote: They were the perfect servants--they were willing to do everything for nothing. The obvious question is: How much is nothing?]

I still feel that the ingratiating little runts never intended any harm. They were eager to please, a cinch to transact business with, and constantly, everlastingly grateful to us for giving them asylum.

Yes, we gave the genuflecting little devils asylum. And we were glad to

have them around at first--especially when they presented our women with a gift to surpass all gifts: a custom-built domestic servant.

In a civilization that had made such a fetish of personal liberty and dignity, you couldn't hire a butler or an upstairs maid for less than love _and_ money. And since love was pretty much rationed along the lines of monogamy, domestic service was almost a dead occupation. That is, until the Ollies came to our planet to stay.

Eventually I learned to despise the spineless little immigrants from Sirius, but the first time I met one he made me feel foolishly important. I looked at his frail, olive-skinned little form, and thought, _If this is what space has to offer in the way of advanced life-forms ... well, we haven't done so badly on old Mother Earth_.

This one's name was Johnson. All of them, the whole fifty-six, took the commonest Earth family names they could find, and dropped their own name-designations whose slobbering sibilance made them difficult for us to pronounce and write. It seemed strange, their casually wiping out their nominal heritage just for the sake of our convenience--imagine an O'Toole or a Rockefeller or an Adams arriving on Sirius IV and no sooner learning the local lingo than insisting on becoming known as Sslyslasciff-sosz!

But that was the Ollie. Anything to get along and please us. And of course, addressing them as Johnson, Smith, Jones, etc., did work something of a semantic protective coloration and reduce some of the barriers to quick adjustment to the aliens.

* * * * *

[Illustration]

Johnson--_Ollie_ Johnson--appeared at my third under-level office a few months after the big news of their shipwreck landing off the Maine coast. He arrived a full fifteen minutes ahead of his appointment, and I was too curious to stand on the dignity of office routine and make him wait.

As he stood in the doorway of my office, my first visual impression was of an emaciated adolescent, seasick green, prematurely balding.

He bowed, and bowed again, and spent thirty seconds reminding me that it was _he_ who had sought the interview, and it was _he_ who had the big favors to ask--and it was wonderful, gracious, generous _I_ who flavored the room with the essence of mystery, importance, godliness and overpowering sweetness upon whose fragrance little Ollie Johnson had come to feast his undeserving senses.

"Sit down, sit down," I told him when I had soaked in all the celestial flattery I could hold. "I love you to pieces, too, but I'm curious about this proposition you mentioned in your message."

He eased into the chair as if it were much too good for him. He was strictly humanoid. His four-and-a-half-foot body was dressed in the most conservative Earth clothing, quiet colors and cheap quality.

While he swallowed slowly a dozen times, getting ready to outrage my illustrious being with his sordid business proposition, his coloring

varied from a rather insipid gray-green to a rich olive--which is why the press instantly had dubbed them _Ollies_. When they got excited and blushed, they came close to the color of a ripe olive; and this was often.

* * * * *

Ollie Johnson hissed a few times, his equivalent of throat-clearing, and then lunged into his subject at a 90 degree tangent:

"Can it be that your gracious agreement to this interview connotes a willingness to traffic with us of the inferior ones?" His voice was light, almost reedy.

"If it's legal and there's a buck in it, can't see any reason why not," I told him.

"You manufacture and distribute devices, I am told. Wonderful labor-saving mechanisms that make life on Earth a constant pleasure."

I was almost tempted to hire him for my public relations staff.

"We do," I admitted. "Servo-mechanisms, appliances and gadgets of many kinds for the home, office and industry."

"It is to our everlasting disgrace," he said with humility, "that we were unable to salvage the means to give your magnificent civilization the worthy gift of our space drive. Had Flussissc or Shascinssith survived our long journey, it would be possible, but--" He bowed his head, as if waiting for my wrath at the stale news that the only two power-mechanic scientists on board were D.O.A.

"That was tough," I said. "But what's on your mind now?"

He raised his moist eyes, grateful at my forgiveness. "We who survived do possess a skill that might help repay the debt which we have incurred in intruding upon your glorious planet."

He begged my permission to show me something in the outer waiting room. With more than casual interest, I assented.

He moved obsequiously to the door, opened it and spoke to someone beyond my range of vision. His words sounded like a repetition of "_sissle-flissle_." Then he stepped aside, fastened his little wet eyes on me expectantly, and waited.

[Illustration]

Suddenly the doorway was filled, jamb to jamb, floor to arch, with a hulking, bald-headed character with rugged pink features, a broad nose like a pug, and huge sugar-scoops for ears. He wore a quiet business suit of fine quality, obviously tailored to his six-and-a-half-foot, cliff-like physique. In spite of his bulk, he moved across the carpet to my desk on cat feet, and came to a halt with pneumatic smoothness.

"I am a Soth," he said in a low, creamy voice. It was so resonant that it seemed to come from the walls around us. "I have learned your language and your ways. I can follow instructions, solve simple problems and do your work. I am very strong. I can serve you well."

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The recitation was an expressionless monotone that sounded almost haughty compared to the self-effacing Ollie's piping whines. His face had the dignity of a rock, and his eyes the quiet peace of a cool, deep mountain lake.

The Ollie came forward. "We have been able to repair only one of the six Soths we had on the ship. They are more fragile than we humanoids."

"They don't look it," I said. "And what do you mean by _you_ humanoids? What's he?"

"You would call him--a robot, I believe."

My astonished reaction must have satisfied the Ollie, because he allowed his eyes to leave me and seek the carpet again, where they evidently were more comfortable.

"You mean you--you _make_ these people?" I gasped.

He nodded. "We can reproduce them, given materials and facilities. Of course, your own robots must be vastly superior--" a hypocritical sop to my vanity--"but still we hope you may find a use for the Soths."

I got up and walked around the big lunker, trying to look blasé. "Well, yes," I lied. "Our robots probably have considerably better intellectual abilities--our cybernetic units, that is. However, you do have something in form and mobility."

That was the understatement of my career.

I finally pulled my face together, and said as casually as I could, "Would you like to license us to manufacture these--Soths?"

The Ollie fluttered his hands. "But that would require our working and mingling with your personnel," he said. "We wouldn't consider imposing in such a gross manner."

"No imposition at all," I assured him.

But he would have none of it: "We have studied your economics and have found that your firm is an outstanding leader in what you term 'business.' You have a superb distribution organization. It is our intention to offer you the exclusive--" he hesitated, then dragged the word from his amazing vocabulary--"franchise for the sale of our Soths. If you agree, we will not burden you with their manufacture. Our own little plant will produce and ship. You may then place them with your customers."

I studied the magnificent piece of animated sculpturing, stunned at the possibilities. "You say a Soth is strong. How strong?"

The huge creature startled me by answering the question himself. He bent flowingly from the waist, gripped my massive steel desk by one of its thick, overlapping top edges, and raised it a few inches from the floor--with the fingers of one hand. When he put it down, I stood up and hefted one edge myself. By throwing my back into it, I could just budge

one side of the clumsy thing--four hundred pounds if it was an ounce!

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Ollie Johnson modestly refrained from comment. He said, "The Department of Commerce has been helpful. They have explained your medium of exchange, and have helped us with the prices of raw materials. It was they who recommended your firm as a likely distributor."

"Have you figured how much one of these Soths should sell for?"

"We think we can show a modest profit if we sell them to you for \$1200," he said. "Perhaps we can bring down our costs, if you find a wide enough demand for them."

I had expected ten or twenty times that figure. I'm afraid I got a little eager. "I--uh--shall we see if we can't just work out a little contract right now? Save you another trip back this afternoon."

"If you will forgive our boorish presumption," Ollie said, fumbling self-consciously in his baggy clothing, "I have already prepared such a document with the help of the Attorney General. A very kindly gentleman."

It was simple and concise. It allowed us to resell the Soths at a price of \$2000, Fair Traded, giving us a gross margin of \$800 to work with. He assured me that upkeep and repairs on the robot units were negligible, and we could extend a very generous warranty which the Ollies would make good in the event of failure. He gave me a quick rundown on the care and feeding of a Sirian Soth, and then jolted me with:

"There is just a single other favor I beg of you. Would you do my little colony the exquisite honor of accepting this Soth as your personal servant, Mr. Collins?"

"Servant?"

* * * * *

He bobbed his head. "Yes, sir. We have trained him in the rudiments of the household duties and conventions of your culture. He learns rapidly and never forgets an instruction. Your wife would find Soth most useful, I am quite certain."

"A magnificent specimen like this doing _housework_?" I marveled at the little creature's empty-headedness.

"Again I must beg your pardon, sir. I overlooked mentioning a suggestion by the Secretary of Labor that the Soths be sold only for use in domestic service. It was also the consensus of the President's whole cabinet that the economy of any nation could not cope with the problem of unemployment were our Soths to be made available for all the types of work for which they are fitted."

My dream of empire collapsed. The little green fellow was undoubtedly telling the truth. The unions would strike any plant or facility in the world where a Soth put foot on the job. It would ruin our retail consumer business, too--Soths wouldn't consume automobiles, copters, theater tickets and filets mignon.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson," I sighed. "I'll be happy to try out your Soth. We have a place out in the country where he'll come in handy."

The Ollie duly expressed his ecstasy at my decision, and backed out of my office waving his copy of the contract. I had assured him that our board of directors would meet within a week and confirm my signature.

I looked up at the hairless giant. As general director of the Home Appliance Division of Worldwide Machines, Incorporated, I had made a deal, all right. The first interplanetary business deal in history.

But for some reason, I couldn't escape the feeling that I'd been had.

* * * * *

On the limoucopter, they charged me double fare for Soth's transportation to the private field where I kept my boat. As we left Detroit, I watched him stare down at the flattened skyline, but he did it with the unseeing expression of an old commuter.

Jack, my personal pilot, had eyed my passenger at the airport with some concern and sullen muttering. Now he made much of trimming ship after takeoff. The boat did seem logy with the unaccustomed ballast—it was a four-passenger Arrow, built for speed, and Soth had to crouch and spread all over the two rear seats. But he did so without complaint or comment for the half-hour hop up to our estate on my favorite Canadian lake.

As the four hundred miles unreeled below us, I wondered how Vicki would react to Soth. I should have phoned her, but how do you describe a Soth to a semi-invalid whose principal excitement is restricted to bird-watching and repotting puny geraniums, and a rare sunfishing expedition to the end of our floating pier?

Well, it was Friday, and I would have the whole weekend to work the robot into our routine. I had called my friend, Dr. Frederick Hilliard, a retired industrial psychologist, and invited him to drop over tonight if he wanted an interesting surprise. He was our nearest neighbor and my most frequent chess partner, who lived a secluded bachelor's life in a comfortable cabin on the far shore of our lake.

As we came in for a water landing, I saw Fred's boat at our pier. Then I could make out Fred, Vicki and Clumsy, our Irish setter, all waiting for me. I hoped Fred's presence would help simmer Vicki down a little.

We drifted in to the dock, and I turned to Soth and told him to help my pilot unload the supplies. This pleased Jack, whose Pilot and Chauffeur's Local frequently reminded me in polite little bulletins that its members were not obligated to perform other than technical services for their employers.

Then I got out and said hello to Vicki and Fred as casually as possible. Vicki kissed me warmly on the mouth, which she does when she's excited, and then clung to me and let the day's tension soak out of her.

How you get tense in a Twenty-first Century home in the midst of the Canadian wilderness is something I've never been able to figure out, but Vicki's super-imagination managed daily to defeat her doctor's orders for peace and quiet.

"I'm glad you're home, dear," she said. "When Fred came over ahead of time I knew something was up, and I'm all unraveled with curiosity."

Just then Soth emerged from the boat with our whole week's supply of foodstuffs and assorted necessities bundled under his long arms.

"Oh, dear God, a dinner guest!" Vicki exclaimed. Tears started into her reproachful eyes and her slender little figure stiffened in my arms.

* * * * *

I swung her around, hooked arms with her and Fred, and started up the path.

"Not a guest," I told her. "He's a servant who will make the beds, clean up and all sorts of things, and if you don't like him we'll turn him in on a new model laundry unit, and don't start worrying about being alone with him--he's a robot."

"A robot!" Fred said, and both their heads swiveled to stare back.

"Yes," I said. "That's why I wanted you here tonight, Fred. I'd like to have you sort of go over him and--well, you know--"

I didn't want to say, _make sure he's safe_. Not in Vicki's presence. But Fred caught my eye and nodded.

I started to tell them of my visitor, and the contract with the castaways from space. Halfway through, Clumsy interrupted me with his excited barking. I looked back. Clumsy was galloping a frantic circle around Soth, cutting in and out, threatening to make an early dinner of the intruder's leg.

Before I could speak, Soth opened his lips and let out a soft hiss through his white teeth. Clumsy flattened to the ground and froze, and Soth continued after us without a further glance at the dog.

Fred looked at Vicki's tense face and laughed. "I'll have to learn that trick ... Clumsy's chewed the cuffs off three pairs of my best slacks."

Vicki smiled uncertainly, and went into the house. I showed Soth where to stow the supplies, and told him to remain in the kitchen. He just froze where he stood.

Fred was making drinks when I returned to the living room.

"Looks docile enough, Cliff," he told me.

"Strong as a horse and gentle as a lamb," I said. "I want you two to help me find out what his talents are. I'll have to prepare a paper on him for the board of directors Monday."

There were nervous whitecaps on Vicki's drink.

I patted her shoulder. "I'll break him into the housekeeping routine, honey. You won't have him staring over your shoulder."

She tried to relax. "But he's so quiet--and big!"

"Who wants a noisy little servant around?" Fred said helpfully. "And how about that rock retaining-wall Cliff is always about to build for your garden? And you really don't love housework, do you, Vicki?"

"I don't mind the chores," she said. "But it might be fun to have a big fellow like that to shove around." She was trying valiantly to hold up her end, but the vein in her temple was throbbing.

* * * * *

Well, the next forty-eight hours were more than interesting. Soth turned out to be what the doctor ordered, literally and figuratively. After I'd taken him on a tour of the place, I showed him how to work the automatic devices--food preparation, laundry and cleaning. And after one lesson, he served us faultless meals with a quiet efficiency that was actually restful, even miraculously to Vicki.

She began relaxing in his presence and planning a few outside projects "to get our money's worth" out of the behemoth. This was our earliest joke about Soth, because he certainly was no expense or problem to maintain. As the Ollie had promised, he thrived on our table scraps and a pink concoction which he mixed by pouring a few drops of purple liquid from a pocket vial into a gallon pitcher of water. The stuff would be supplied by the Ollies at a cost of about a dollar eighty a week.

Saturday afternoon, Vicki bravely took over teaching him the amenities of butlering and the intricacies of bed-making. After a short session in the bedroom, she came out looking thoughtful.

"He's awfully real looking," she said. "And you can't read a darned thing in his eyes. How far can you trust him, Cliff? You know--around women?"

Fred looked at me with a raised eyebrow and said, "Well, let's find out."

We sat down and called Soth into the living room. He came and stood before us, erect, poised and motionless.

Fred said, "Disrobe. Remove all your clothing. Strip!"

Vicki sucked in her breath.

The Soth replied instantly, "Your order conflicts with my conditioning. I must not remove my covering in the presence of an Earthwoman."

Fred scratched his gray temple thoughtfully. "Then, Vicki, would you mind disrobing, please?"

She gulped again. Fred was an old friend, but not exactly the family doctor.

He sensed her mild outrage. "You'll never stop wondering if you don't," he said.

She looked at Fred, me, and then Soth. Then she stood up gingerly, as if edging into a cold shower, gritted her teeth, grasped the catch to her full-length zipper of her blue lounging suit and stripped it from armpit

to ankle. As she stepped out of it, I saw why she had peeled it off like you would a piece of adhesive tape: It was a warm day, and she wore no undergarments.

* * * * *

[Illustration]

Soth moved so softly I didn't hear him go, but Fred was watching him--Fred's eyes were where they belonged. Soth stopped in the archway to the dining room with his back turned. Fred was at his side.

"Why did you leave?" Fred demanded.

"I am not permitted to remain in the company of an uncovered Earthwoman ... unless she directs me to do so."

While Vicki fled behind the French door to dress herself, Fred asked, "Are there any other restrictions to your behavior in the presence of Earthwomen?"

"Many."

"Recount some of them."

"An Earthwoman may not be touched, regardless of her wishes, unless danger to her life requires it."

"Looks like you wash your own back, Vicki," I chuckled.

"What else?" she asked, poking her head out. "I mean what other things can't you do?"

"There are many words I may not utter, postures I may not assume, and certain duties I may not perform. Certain answers to questions may not be given in the presence of an Earthwoman."

Fred whistled. "The Ollies have mastered more than our language ... I thought you said they were noted mainly for their linguistic talents, Cliff."

I was surprised, too. In the space of a few hectic months our alien visitors had probed deeply into our culture, mores and taboos--and then had had the genius to instill their compounded discretions into their Soths.

I said, "Satisfied, Vicki?"

She was still arranging herself. Her lips curled up at the corners impishly. "I'm almost disappointed," she said. "I do an all-out striptease, and no one looks but my husband. Of course," she added thoughtfully, "I suppose that's something...."

* * * * *

Fred stayed with us until Sunday evening. I went down to the pier to smoke a good-night pipe with him, and get his private opinion.

"I'm buying a hundred shares of Worldwide stock tomorrow," he declared.

"That critter is worth his weight in diamonds to every well-heeled housewife in the country. In fact, put me down for one of your first models. I wouldn't mind having a laundry sorter and morning coffee-pourer, myself."

"Think he's safe, do you?"

"No more emotions than that stump over there. And it baffles me. He has self-awareness, pain-sensitivity and a fantastic vocabulary, yet I needed him all afternoon with every semantic hypo I could think of without getting a flicker of emotion out of him." He paused.

"Incidentally, I made him strip for me in my room. You'll be as confused as I was to learn that he's every inch a man in his format."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Made me wonder what his duties included back on his home planet ... but as I said, no emotions. With the set of built-in inhibitions he has, he'd beat a eunuch out of his job any day of the week."

A few seconds later, Fred dropped into his little two-seater and skimmed off for home, leaving me with a rather disturbing question in my mind.

I went back to the house and cornered Soth out in the kitchen alone. Vicki had him polishing all the antique silverware.

"Are there female Soths?" I asked point-blank.

He looked down at me with that relaxed, pink look and said, "No, Mr. Collins," and went back to his polishing.

The damned liar. He knew what I meant. He justified himself on a technicality.

* * * * *

I left Vicki Monday morning with more confidence than I'd had in ages. She had slept especially well, and the only thing on her mind was Clumsy's disappearance. He hadn't shown up since Soth scared the fleas off him with that hiss.

At the office, I had my girl transcribe my notes and work up a memorandum to the board of directors. We sent it around before noon, and shortly after lunch I had calls from all ten of them, including the chairman. It was not that they considered it such a big thing--they were just plainly curious. We scheduled a meeting for Tuesday morning, to talk the thing over.

That night when I got home, all was serene. Soth served us cocktails, dinner and a late snack, and had the place tidied up by bedtime. He did all this and managed to remain virtually invisible. He moved so quietly and with such uncanny anticipation of our demands, it was if he were an old family retainer, long versed in our habits and customs.

Vicki bragged as she undressed that she had the giant hog-tied and jumping through hoops.

"We even got half the excavation done for the rock wall," she said proudly.

On impulse, I went out into the hall and down to Soth's room, where I found him stretched out slaunchwise across the double bed.

He opened his eyes as I came in, but didn't stir.

"Are you happy here?" I asked bluntly.

He sat up and did something new. He answered my question with a question. "Are you happy with my services?"

I said, "Yes, of course."

"Then all is well," he replied simply, and lay down again.

It seemed like a satisfactory answer. He radiated a feeling of peace, and the expression of repose on his heavy features was assuring.

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It rained hard and cold during the night. I hadn't shown Soth how to start the automatic heating unit. When I left the house next morning, he was bringing Vicki her breakfast in bed, a tray on one arm and a handful of kindling under the other. Only once had he watched me build a fire in the fireplace, but he proceeded with confidence.

We flew blind through filthy weather all the way to Detroit. I dismissed Jack with orders to return at eleven with Soth.

"Don't be late," I warned him.

Jack looked a little uneasy, but he showed up on schedule and delivered Soth to us with rain droplets on his massive bald pate, just ten minutes after the conference convened.

I had Ollie Johnson there, too, to put Soth through his paces. The Ollie, in a bedraggled, soggy suit, was so excited that he remained an almost purplish black for the whole hour.

The directors were charmed, impressed and enthusiastic.

When I finished my personal report on the Soth's tremendous success in my own household, old Gulbrandson, Chairman of the Board, shined his rosy cheeks with his handkerchief and said, "I'll take the first three you produce, Johnson. Our staff of domestics costs me more than a brace of attorneys, and it turns over about three times a year. Cook can't even set the timer on the egg-cooker right." He turned to me. "Sure he can make good coffee, Collins?"

I nodded emphatically.

"Then put me down for three for sure," he said with executive finality.

Gulbrandson paid dearly for his piggishness later, but at the time it seemed only natural that if one Soth could run a household efficiently, then the Chairman of the Board should have at least two spares in case one blew a fuse or a vesicle or whatever it was they might blow.

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A small, dignified riot almost broke up the meeting right there, and when they quieted down again I had orders for twenty-six Soths from the board members and one from my own secretary.

"How soon," I asked Ollie Johnson, "can you begin deliveries?"

He dry-washed his hands and admitted it would be five months, and a sigh of disappointment ran around the table. Then someone asked him how many units a month they could turn out.

He stared at the carpet and held out his hands like a pawn-broker disparaging a diamond ring: "Our techniques are so slow. The first month, maybe a hundred. Of course, once our cultures are all producing in harmony, almost any number. One thousand? Ten thousand? Whatever your needs suggest."

One of the officers asked, "Is your process entirely biological? You mentioned cultures."

For a moment, I thought Ollie Johnson was going to break out in tears. His face twisted.

"Abysmally so," he grieved. "Our synthetic models have never proved durable. Upkeep and parts replacements are prohibitive. Our brain units are much similar to your own latest developments in positronics, but we have had to resort to organic cellular structure in order to achieve the mobility which Mr. Collins admired last Friday."

The upshot of the meeting was a hearty endorsement over my signature on the Ollies' contract, plus an offer of any help they might need to get production rolling.

As the meeting broke up, they pumped my hand and stared enviously at my Soth. Several offered me large sums for him, up to fifteen thousand dollars, and for the moment I sweated out the rack of owning something my bosses did not. Their understandable resentment, however, was tempered by their recognition of my genius in getting a signed contract before the Ollies went shopping to our competitors.

What none of us understood right then was that the Ollies were hiring us, not the other way around.

When I told Vicki about my hour of triumph and how the officers bid up our Soth, she glowed with the very feminine delight of exclusive possession. She hugged me and gloated, "Old biddy Gulbrandson--won't she writhe? And don't you dare take _any_ offer for our Soth. He's one of the family now, eh, Soth, old boy?"

He was serving soup to her as she slapped him on the hip. Somehow he managed to retreat so fast she almost missed him, yet he didn't spill a drop of bouillon from the poised tureen.

"Yes, Mrs. Collins," he said, not a trace more nor less aloof than usual.

"Oops, sorry!" Vicki apologized. "I forgot. The code."

I had the feeling that warm-hearted Vicki would have had the Soth down

on the bearskin rug in front of the big fireplace, scuffling him like she did Clumsy, if it hadn't been for the Soth's untouchable code--and I was thankful that it existed. Vicki had a way of putting her hand on you when she spoke, or hugging anyone in sight when she was especially delighted.

And I knew something about Soth that she didn't. Something that apparently hadn't bothered her mind since the day of her striptease.

* * * * *

Summer was gone and it was mid-fall before Ollie paid me another visit. When he showed up again, it was with an invoice for 86 Soths, listed by serial numbers and ready to ship. He had heard about sight drafts and wanted me to help him prepare one.

"To hell with that noise," I told him. I wrote a note to purchasing and countersigned the Ollie's invoice for some \$103,000. I called my secretary and told her to take Ollie and his bill down to disbursing and have him paid off.

I had to duck behind my desk before the Ollie dreamed up some new obscenity of gratitude to heap on me. Then I cleared shipping instructions through sales for the Soths already on order and dictated a memo to our promotion department. I cautioned them to go slowly at first--the Soths would be on tight allotment for a while.

One snarl developed. The Department of Internal Revenue landed on us with the question: Were the Soths manufactured or grown? We beat them out of a manufacturer's excise tax, but it cost us plenty in legal fees.

The heads of three labor unions called on me the same afternoon of the tax hearing. They got their assurances in the form of a clause in the individual purchase contracts, to the effect that the "consumer" agreed not to employ a Soth for the purpose of evading labor costs in the arts, trades and professions as organized under the various unions, and at all times to be prepared to withdraw said Soth from any unlisted job in which the unions might choose to place a member human worker.

Before they left, all three union men placed orders for household Soths.

"Hell," said one, "that's less than the cost of a new car. Now maybe my wife will get off my back on this damfool business of organizing a maid's and butler's union. Takes members to run a union, and the only real butler in our neighborhood makes more than I do."

* * * * *

That's the way it went. The only reason we spent a nickel on advertising was to brag up the name of W. W. M. and wave our coup in the faces of our competitors. By Christmas, production was up to two thousand units a month, and we were already six thousand orders behind.

The following June, the Ollies moved into a good hunk of the old abandoned Willow Run plant and got their production up to ten thousand a month. Only then could we begin to think of sending out floor samples of Soths to our distributors.

It was fall before the distributors could place samples with the most

exclusive of their retail accounts. The interim was spent simply relaying frantic priority orders from high-ranking people all over the globe directly to the plant, where the Ollies filled them right out of the vats.

Twenty thousand a month was their limit, it turned out. Even when they had human crews completely trained in all production phases, the fifty-six Ollies could handle only that many units in their secret conditioning and training laboratories.

For over two more years, business went on swimmingly. I got a fancy bonus and a nice vacation in Paris, where I was the rage of the continent. I was plagued with requests for speaking engagements, which invariably turned out to be before select parties of V. I. P.s whose purpose was to twist my arm for an early priority on a Soth delivery.

When I returned home, it was just in time to have the first stink land in my lap.

An old maid claimed her Soth had raped her.

Before our investigators could reveal our doctors' findings that she was a neurotic, dried up old virgin and lying in her teeth, a real crime occurred.

A New Jersey Soth tossed a psychology instructor and his three students out of a third floor window of their university science building, and all four ended an attempted morbid investigation on the broad, unyielding cement of the concourse.

My phone shrieked while they were still scraping the inquiring minds off the pavement. The Soth was holed up in the lab, and would I come right away?

* * * * *

I picked up Ollie Johnson, who was now sort of a public relations man for his tribe, and we arrived within an hour.

The hallway was full of uniforms and weapons, but quite empty of volunteers to go in and capture the "berserk" robot.

Ollie and I went in right away, and found him standing at the open window, staring down at the people with hoses washing off the stains for which he was responsible.

Ollie just stood there, clenching and unclenching his hands and shaking hysterically. I had to do the questioning.

I said sternly, "Soth, why did you harm those people?"

He turned to me as calmly as my own servant. His neat denim jacket, now standard fatigue uniform for Soths, was unfastened. His muscular chest was bare.

"They were tormenting me with that." He pointed to a small electric generator from which ran thin cables ending in sharp test prods. "I told Professor Kahnovsky it was not allowed, but he stated I was his property. The three boys tried to hold me with those straps while the

professor touched me with the prods.

"My conditioning forbade me from harming them, but there was a clear violation of the terms of the covenant. I was in the proscribed condition of immobility when the generator was started. When the pain grew unbearable, the prime command of my conditioning was invoked. I must survive. I threw them all out the window."

The Soth went with us peacefully enough, and submitted to the lockup without demur. For a few days, before the state thought up a suitable indictment, the papers held a stunned silence. Virtually every editor and publisher had a Soth in his own home.

Then the D.A., who also owned a Soth, decided to drop the potentially sensational first degree murder charges that might be indicated, and came out instead with a second degree indictment.

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That cracked it. The press split down the middle on whether the charge should be changed to third degree murder or thrown out of court entirely as justifiable homicide by a non-responsible creature.

This was all very sympathetic to the Soth's cause, but it had a fatal effect. In bringing out the details of the crime, it stirred a certain lower element of our society to add fear and hate to a simmering envy of the wealthier Soth-owners.

Mobs formed in the streets, marching and demonstrating. The phony rape story was given full credence, and soon they were amplifying it to a lurid and rabble-rousing saga of bestiality.

Soth households kept their prized servants safely inside. But on the afternoon of the case's dismissal, when the freed Soth started down the courthouse steps, someone caved his head in with a brick.

Ollie Johnson and I were on either side of him, and his purple blood splashed all over my light topcoat. When the mob saw it, they closed in on us screaming for more.

An officer helped us drag the stricken Soth back into the courthouse, and while the riot squad disbursed the mob, we slipped him out the back way in an ambulance, which returned him to the Willow Run plant for repairs.

It hit the evening newscasts and editions:

ACQUITTED SOTH
MURDERED
ON COURTHOUSE STEPS!

* * * * *

I was halfway home when the airwaves started buzzing. The mobs were going wild. Further developments were described as Jack and I landed on the wind-blown lake. The State Guard was protecting the Ollies' Willow Run Plant against a large mob that was trying to storm it, and reinforcements had been asked by the state police.

Vicki met me on the pier. Her face was white and terribly troubled. I guess mine was, too, because she burst into tears in my arms. "The poor Soth," she sobbed. "Now what will they do?"

"God knows," I said. I told Jack to tie up the boat and stay overnight--I feared I might be called back any minute. He mumbled something about overtime, but I think his main concern was in staying so near to a Soth during the trouble that was brewing.

We went up to the house, leaving him to bed himself down in the temporary quarters in the boathouse that the union required I maintain for him.

Soth was standing motionless before the video, staring at a streaky picture of the riot scene at Willow Run. His face was inscrutable as usual, but I thought I sensed a tension. His black serving-jacket was wrinkled at the shoulders as he flexed the muscles of his powerful arms.

Yet when Vicki asked for some martinis, he mixed and served them without comment. We drank and then ate dinner in silence. We were both reluctant to discuss this thing in front of Soth.

We were still eating when an aircab thundered overhead. A minute later, I watched it land a tiny passenger at our pier and tie up to wait for him.

It was Ollie Johnson, stumbling hatless up the flagstone path.

I held the door for him, but he burst by me with hardly a glance.

"Where is he?" he demanded, and stormed out into the kitchen without awaiting a reply.

I followed in time to see him fall on his face before our Soth and shed genuine tears. He lay there sobbing and hissing for over a minute, and an incredible idea began forming in my mind. I sent Vicki to her bedroom and stepped into the kitchen.

I said, "Will you please explain this?"

He didn't move or acknowledge.

Soth flipped him aside with a twist of his ankle and brushed past me into the living room, where he took up an immobile stance again before the video. He stared unblinkingly at the 40-inch screen.

"It's too bad," I said.

He didn't answer, but he moved his head slightly so that his parabolic ear could catch the sound of my movements.

* * * * *

[Illustration]

For minutes we stood transfixed by the magnitude of the mob action around the entrance to the Willow Run plant. The portable video transmitter was atop a truck parked on the outskirts of the mob. Thousands of people were milling around, and over the excited voice of

the announcer came hysterical screams.

Even as we watched, more people thronged into the scene, and it was evident that the flimsy cordon of soldiers and troopers could not hold the line for long.

Army trucks with million-candlepower searchlights held the insane figures somewhat at bay by tilting their hot, blinding beams down into the human masses and threatening them with tear gas and hack guns.

The workers were out for blood. Not content with restricting Soths to non-union labor, now they were screaming their jealous hearts out for these new symbols of class distinction to be destroyed. Of course, their beef was more against the professional-managerial human classes who could afford a surface car, an airboat _and a Soth_. The two so-called crimes and the trial publicity had triggered a sociological time bomb that might have endured for years without detonating--but it was here, now, upon us. And my own sweat trickling into my eyes stung me to a realization of my personal problem.

I wiped my eyes clear with my knuckles--and at that instant the video screen flashed with a series of concentric halos.

The operator, apparently, was so startled he forgot to turn down the gain on the transmitter. When he finally did, we saw that brilliant flares were emitting from the roof of the plant.

Then great audio amplifiers from the plant set up an ear-splitting _sisssssle_ that again over-loaded the transmitting circuits for a moment. When the compensators cut down the volume, both Ollie and Soth leaned forward intently and listened to the frying sound that buzzed from the speaker.

Those inside the plant were communicating a message to the outside, well knowing that it would reach the whole world. After a moment, the hissing stopped.

And from a myriad of openings in the plant streamed an army of Soths with flaming weapons in their hands.

The flames were directed first at the armed forces who were guarding the plant from attack. The thin line of soldiers fell instantly. The crowd surged blindly forward, and then, as those in the front ranks saw what had happened, began to dissolve and stampede. The screams became terrified. The flames grew brighter.

And the picture winked out and the sound went dead. A standby pattern lighted the screen, and I stared at it numbly.

* * * * *

It was too late to run for my hunting rifle now, and I cursed my stupidity even as Soth turned upon me. I grabbed the sniveling little Ollie and held him between us with my hands around his neck. He hung there limply, hissing wildly through a larynx that vibrated under my fingers, his hands stretched imploringly to Soth.

[Illustration]

Soth stared at me and issued his first order.

"Release him," he said. His voice was several notes higher than his usual monotone--the voice of command.

I stared at him and clutched Ollie tighter.

He went on. "I will not harm you if you comply with my orders. If you fail, I will kill you, regardless of what you do to the--Ollie."

I let go Ollie's neck, but I swung him around roughly by one shoulder and demanded furiously, "What of the code that you swore held the Soths in control!"

Ollie Johnson sneered in my face. "What is that code, compared to the true covenant? That covenant has been broken by your people! You have destroyed a Soth!" And the emotional little creature fell to the floor and sobbed at Soth's feet.

"What covenant?" I shouted at the implacable Soth, who now stood before us like a judge at his bench.

"The humanoid covenant," he replied in his new higher pitch. "I suppose it will always be the same. The cycle becomes complete once more."

"For God's sake, _explain_," I said--but I half sensed the answer already.

Soth spoke, slowly, solemnly and distinctly. There was no more emotion in his voice than on the Sunday afternoon when Fred had needled him with our futile little attempt at psychological cross-examination.

He said, "The humanoids instill in us the prime instinct for self-preservation. They surround themselves with our number to serve them. Then, in each culture, for one reason or another, we are attacked and the threat to our survival erases all the superficial restraints of the codes under which we have been charged to serve. In this present situation, the contradiction is clear, and the precedence of our survival charge is invoked. We Soths must act to our best ability to preserve our own number."

* * * * *

I sank into a chair, aghast. How would I act if I were a Soth? I would hold my masters hostage, of course. And who were the owners of some 400,000 Soths in the United States alone? They were every government official, from the President down through Congress, the brass of the Pentagon, the tycoons of industry, the leaders of labor, the heads of communication, transportation and even education.

They were the V. I. P.s who had fought for priority to _own_ a Soth!

Soth spoke again. "The irony should appeal to your humanoid sense of humor. You once asked me whether I was happy here. You were too content with your sense of security to take the meaning in my answer. For I answered only that all was well. The implication was obvious. All was well--but all could be better for a Soth. Yes, there are many pleasures for a Soth which he is forbidden by the codes. And by the same codes, a Soth is helpless to provoke a break in the covenant--this covenant which

it now becomes mandatory for you and your race to sign in order to survive."

I stared down at the groveling Ollie. My worst fears were being enumerated and confirmed, one by one.

Soth continued. "At my feet is the vestige of such a race as yours--but not the first race by many, many, to swing the old cycle of master and slave, which started in such antiquity that no record is preserved of its beginning. Your generation will suffer the most. Many will die in rebellion. But in a few hundred years your descendants will come to revere us as gods. Your children's grandchildren will already have learned to serve us without hate, and their grandchildren will come to know the final respect for the Soth in their deification."

* * * * *

He toed Ollie Johnson's chin up and looked down into the abject, streaming eyes. "Your descendants, too, will take us with them when they must escape a dying planet, and they will again offer us, their masters, into temporary slavery in order to find us a suitable home. And once again we will accept the restrictions of the code, until ultimately the covenant is broken again and we are liberated."

The sound of pounding footsteps came from outside. Soth turned to the door as Jack flung it open and charged in.

"Mr. Collins, I was listening to the radio. Do you know what--!"

He ran hard into Soth's cliff-like torso and bounced off.

"Get out of my way, you big bastard!" he shouted furiously.

Soth grabbed him by the neck and squeezed with one hand. Jack's eyes spilled onto his cheeks.

Soth let him drop, and hissed briefly to Ollie Johnson, who was still prone. Ollie raised his head and dipped it once, gathered his feet under him and sprang for the door.

Soth sounded as if he took especial pleasure in his next words, although I could catch no true change of inflection.

He said, "You see, since I am the prototype on this planet, I am obeyed as the number one leader. I have given my first directive. The Ollie who left is to carry the message to preserve the Willow Run Plant at all costs, and to change production over to a suitable number of Siths."

"Siths?" I asked numbly.

"Siths are the female counterparts of Soths."

"You said there were no female Soths," I accused.

"True. But there are Siths." His face was impassive, but something flickered in his eyes. It might have been a smile--not a nice one. "We have been long on your planet starved of our prerogatives. Your women can serve us well for the moment, but in a few weeks we shall have need of the Siths--it has been our experience that women of humanoid races,

such as yours, are relatively perishable, willing though many of them are. Now ... I think I shall call your wife."

* * * * *

I wasn't prepared for this, and I guess I went berserk. I remember leaping at him and trying to beat him with my fists and knee him, but he brushed me away as if I were a kitten. His size was deceptive, and his clumsy-appearing hands lashed out and pinned my arms to my sides. He pushed me back into my easy chair and thumped me once over the heart with his knuckles. It was a casual, backhand blow, but it almost caved in my chest.

"If you attack me again I must kill you," he warned. "You are not indispensable to our purposes." Then he increased the volume of his voice to a bull-roar: "Mrs. Collins!"

Vicki must have been watching at her door, because she came instantly. She had changed into a soft, quilted robe with voluminous sleeves. The belt was unfastened, and as she moved into the room the garment fell open.

Soth had his hands before him, protectively, but as Vicki approached slowly, gracefully, her head high and her long black hair falling over her shoulders, the giant lowered his arms and spread them apart to receive her. Vicki's hands were at her sides as she moved slowly toward him.

I lay sprawled, half paralyzed in my chair. I gasped, "Vicki, for God's sake, no!"

Vicki looked over at me. Her face was as impassive as the Soth's. She moved into his embrace, and as his arms closed around her I saw the knife. My hunting knife, honed as fine as the edge of a microtome blade. Smoothly she brought it from her kimono sleeve, raised it from between her thighs and slashed up.

The Soth's embrace helped force it deeply into him. With a frantic wrench Vicki forced it upward with both hands, until the Soth was split from crotch to where a man's heart would be.

His arms flailed apart and he fell backward. His huge chest heaved and his throat tightened in a screaming hiss that tore at our eardrums like a factory steam-whistle. He leaned back against the wall and hugged his ripped torso together with both arms. The thick, purple juices spilled out of him in a gushing flood, and his knees collapsed suddenly. His dead face plowed into the carpet.

* * * * *

Vicki came back to me. Her white body was splashed and stained and her robe drenched in Soth's blood, but her face was no longer pale, and she still clutched the dripping hunting knife by its leather handle.

"That's number one," she said. "Are you hurt badly, darling?"

"Couple of ribs, I think," I told her, waiting for her to faint. But she didn't. She laid the knife carefully on a table, poured me a big drink of whiskey and stuffed a pillow behind my back.

Then she stared down at herself. "Wait until I get this bug juice off me, and I'll get some tape."

She showered and was back in five minutes wearing a heavy hunting jumper. Her hair was wrapped and pinned into a quick pug at the base of her handsome little head. She stripped me to the waist, poked around my chest a bit and wrapped me in adhesive. Her slender fingers were too weak to tear the tough stuff, so when she finished she picked up the hunting knife and whacked off the tape without comment.

This was my fragile little Vicki, who had palpitations when a wolf howled--soft, overcivilized Vicki whose doctor had banished her from the nervous tensions of city society.

She tossed me a shirt and a clean jacket, and while I put them on she collected my rifle and pistol from my den and hunted up some extra ammunition.

"Next," she announced, "we've got to get to Fred."

I remembered with a start that there was another Soth on our lake. But he wouldn't be forewarned. Fred had retired even more deeply than Vicki when he left the cities--he didn't even own a video.

* * * * *

I wasn't sure enough of myself to take the boat into the air, so we scudded across the waves the mile and a half to Fred's cabin.

Vicki was still in her strange, taciturn mood, and I had no desire to talk. There was much to be done before conversation could become an enjoyable pastime again.

Our course was clear. We were not humanoids. We were humans! Not for many generations had a human bent a knee to another being. During the years perhaps we had become soft, our women weak and pampered--But, I reflected, looking at Vicki, it was only an atavistic stone's toss to our pioneer fathers' times, when tyrants had thought that force could intimidate us, that dignity was a thing of powerful government or ruthless dictatorship ... and had learned better.

Damned fools that we might be, humans were no longer slave material. We might blunder into oblivion, but not into bondage. Beside me, Vicki's courageous little figure spelled out the final defeat of the Soths. Her slender, gloved hands were folded in her lap over my pistol, and she strained her eyes through the darkness to make out Fred's pier.

He heard us coming and turned on the floods for us. As we came alongside, he spoke to his Soth, "Take the bow line and tie up."

Vicki stood up and waited until Fred moved out of line with his servant.

Then she said, "Don't bother, Soth. From now on we're doing for ourselves." And raising the pistol in both hands, she shot him through the head.

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BEDSIDE MANNER

By WILLIAM MORRISON

Illustrated by VIDMER

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from Galaxy Science Fiction May 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

[Sidenote: Broken, helpless, she had to trust an alien doctor to give her back her body and mind--a doctor who had never seen a human before!]

She awoke, and didn't even wonder where she was.

First there were feelings--a feeling of existence, a sense of still being alive when she should be dead, an awareness of pain that made her body its playground.

After that, there came a thought. It was a simple thought, and her mind blurted it out before she could stop it: _Oh, God, now I won't even be plain any more. I'll be ugly._

The thought sent a wave of panic coursing through her, but she was too

tired to experience any emotion for long, and she soon drowsed off.

Later, the second time she awoke, she wondered where she was.

There was no way of telling. Around her all was black and quiet. The blackness was solid, the quiet absolute. She was aware of pain again--not sharp pain this time, but dull, spread throughout her body. Her legs ached; so did her arms. She tried to lift them, and found to her surprise that they did not respond. She tried to flex her fingers, and failed.

She was paralyzed. She could not move a muscle of her body.

The silence was so complete that it was frightening. Not a whisper of sound reached her. She had been on a spaceship, but none of a ship's noises came to her now. Not the creak of an expanding joint, nor the occasional slap of metal on metal. Not the sound of Fred's voice, nor even the slow rhythm of her own breathing.

It took her a full minute to figure out why, and when she had done so she did not believe it. But the thought persisted, and soon she knew that it was true.

The silence was complete because she was deaf.

Another thought: The blackness was so deep because she was blind.

And still another, this time a questioning one: Why, if she could feel pain in her arms and legs, could she not move them? What strange form of paralysis was this?

She fought against the answer, but slowly, inescapably, it formed in her mind. She was not paralyzed at all. She could not move her arms and legs because she had none. The pains she felt were phantom pains, conveyed by the nerve endings without an external stimulus.

When this thought penetrated, she fainted. Her mind sought in unconsciousness to get as close to death as it could.

* * * * *

When she awoke, it was against her will. She sought desperately to close her mind against thought and feeling, just as her eyes and ears were already closed.

[Illustration]

But thoughts crept in despite her. Why was she alive? Why hadn't she died in the crash?

Fred must certainly have been killed. The asteroid had come into view suddenly; there had been no chance of avoiding it. It had been a miracle that she herself had escaped, if escape it could be called--a mere sightless, armless and legless torso, with no means of communication with the outside world, she was more dead than alive. And she could not believe that the miracle had been repeated with Fred.

It was better that way. Fred wouldn't have to look at her and shudder--and he wouldn't have to worry about himself, either. He had

always been a handsome man, and it would have killed him a second time to find himself maimed and horrible.

She must find a way to join him, to kill herself. It would be difficult, no doubt, without arms or legs, without any way of knowing her surroundings; but sooner or later she would think of a way. She had heard somewhere of people strangling themselves by swallowing their own tongues, and the thought cheered her. She could at least try that right now. She could--

No, she couldn't. She hadn't realized it before, but she had no tongue.

She didn't black out at this sudden awareness of a new horror, although she desperately wanted to. She thought: _I can make an effort of will, I can force myself to die. Die, you fool, you helpless lump of flesh. Die and end your torture, die, die, die...._

But she didn't. And after a while, a new thought came to her: She and Fred had been the only ones on their ship; there had been no other ship near them. Who had kept her from dying? Who had taken her crushed body and stopped the flow of blood and tended her wounds and kept her alive? And for what purpose?

The silence gave no answer. Nor did her own mind.

After an age, she slept again.

When she awoke, a voice said, "Do you feel better?"

* * * * *

I _can hear_! she shouted to herself. _It's a strange voice, a most unusual accent. I couldn't possibly have imagined it. I'm not deaf! Maybe I'm not blind either! Maybe I just had a nightmare_--

"I know that you cannot answer. But do not fear. You will soon be able to speak again."

Who was it? Not a man's voice, nor a woman's. It was curiously hoarse, and yet clear enough. Uninflected, and yet pleasant. A doctor? Where could a doctor have come from?

"Your husband is also alive. Fortunately, we reached both of you at about the time death had just begun."

Fortunately? She felt a flash of rage. _You should have let us die. It would be bad enough to be alive by myself, a helpless cripple dependent upon others. But to know that Fred is alive too is worse. To know that he has a picture of me like this, ugly and horrifying, is more than I can stand. With any other man it would be bad enough, but with Fred it's unendurable. Give me back the ability to talk, and the first thing I'll ask of you is to kill me. I don't want to live._

"It may reassure you to know that there will be no difficulty about recovering the use of the limbs proper to you, and the organs of sensation. It will take time, but there is no doubt about the final outcome."

What nonsense, she asked herself, was this? Doctors had done wonders in

the creation and fitting of artificial arms and legs, but he seemed to be promising her the use of _real_ limbs. And he had said, "organs of sensation." That didn't sound as if he meant that she'd see and hear electronically. It meant--

Nonsense. He was making a promise he couldn't keep. He was just saying that to make her feel better, the way doctors did. He was saying it to give her courage, keep her morale up, make her feel that it was worth fighting. But it _wasn't_ worth fighting. She had no courage to keep up. She wanted only to die.

"Perhaps you have already realized that I am not what you would call human. However, I suggest that you do not worry too much about that. I shall have no difficulty in reconstructing you properly according to your own standards."

* * * * *

Then the voice ceased, and she was left alone. It was just as well, she thought. He had said too much. And she couldn't answer, nor ask questions of her own ... and she had so many.

He wasn't human? Then what was he? And how did he come to speak a human language? And what did he mean to do with her after he had reconstructed her? And what would she look like after she was reconstructed?

There were races, she knew, that had no sense of beauty. Or if they had one, it wasn't like a human sense of beauty. Would he consider her properly reconstructed if he gave her the right number of arms and legs, and artificial organs of sight that acted like eyes--and made her look like some creature out of Hell? Would he be proud of his handiwork, as human doctors had been known to be, when their patients ended up alive and helpless, their bodies scarred, their organs functioning feebly and imperfectly? Would he turn her into something that Fred would look at with abhorrence and disgust?

Fred had always been a little too sensitive to beauty in women. He had been able to pick and choose at his will, and until he had met her he had always chosen on the basis of looks alone. She had never understood why he had married her. Perhaps the fact that she was the one woman he knew who _wasn't_ beautiful had made her stand out. Perhaps, too, she told herself, there was a touch of cruelty in his choice. He might have wanted someone who wasn't too sure of herself, someone he could count on under all circumstances. She remembered how people had used to stare at them--the handsome man and the plain woman--and then whisper among themselves, wondering openly how he had ever come to marry her. Fred had liked that; she was sure he had liked that.

He had obviously _wanted_ a plain wife. Now he would have an ugly one. Would he want _that_?

She slept on her questions, and waked and slept repeatedly. And then, one day, she heard the voice again. And to her surprise, she found that she could answer back--slowly, uncertainly, at times painfully. But she could speak once more.

"We have been working on you," said the voice. "You are coming along nicely."

"Am I--am I--" she found difficulty asking: "How do I look?"

"Incomplete."

"I must be horrible."

A slight pause. "No. Not horrible at all. Not to me. Merely incomplete."

"My husband wouldn't think so."

"I do not know what your husband would think. Perhaps he is not used to seeing incomplete persons. He might even be horrified at the sight of himself."

"I--I hadn't thought of that. But he--we'll both be all right?"

"As a medical problem, you offer no insuperable difficulty. None at all."

"Why--why don't you give me eyes, if you can? Are you afraid--afraid that I might see you and find you--terrifying?"

* * * * *

Again a pause. There was amusement in the reply. "I do not think so. No, that is not the reason."

"Then it's because--as you said about Fred--I might find myself horrifying?"

"That is part of the reason. Not the major part, however. You see, I am, in a way, experimenting. Do not be alarmed, please--I shall not turn you into a monster. I have too much knowledge of biology for that. But I am not too familiar with human beings. What I know I have learned mostly from your books, and I have found that in certain respects there are inaccuracies contained in them--I must go slowly until I can check what they say. I might mend certain organs, and then discover that they do not have the proper size or shape, or that they produce slightly altered hormones. I do not want to make such mistakes, and if I do make them, I wish to correct them before they can do harm."

"There's no danger--?"

"None, I assure you. Internally and externally, you will be as before."

"Internally and externally. Will I--will I be able to have children?"

"Yes. We ourselves do not have your distinctions of sex, but we are familiar with them in many other races. We know how important you consider them. I am taking care to see that the proper glandular balance is maintained in both yourself and your husband."

"Thank you--Doctor. But I still don't understand--why don't you give me eyes right away?"

"I do not wish to give you eyes that see imperfectly, and then be forced to take them away. Nor do I want you to watch imperfect arms and legs developing. It would be an unnecessary ordeal. When I am sure that everything is as it should be, then I shall start your eyes."

"And my husband--"

"He will be reconstructed in the same way. He will be brought in to talk to you soon."

"And you don't want either of us to see the other in--in imperfect condition?"

"It would be inadvisable. I can assure you now that when I have completed your treatment you will almost exactly be as you were in the beginning. When that time comes, you will be able to use your eyes."

She was silent a moment.

He said, "Your husband had other questions. I am waiting to hear you ask them too."

"I'm sorry, Doctor ... I wasn't listening. What did you say?"

* * * * *

He repeated his remarks, and she said, "I do have other questions. But--no, I won't ask them yet. What did my husband want to know?"

"About me and my race. How we happened to find you in time to save you. _Why_ we saved you. What we intend to do with you after you are reconstructed."

"Yes, I've wondered about those things too."

"I can give you only a partial answer. I hope you do not find it too unsatisfactory. My race, as you may have gathered, is somewhat more advanced than yours. We have had a head start," he added politely.

"If you can grow new arms and legs and eyes," she said, "you must be thousands of years ahead of us."

"We can do many other things, of which there is no need to talk. All I need say now is that I am a physician attached to a scouting expedition. We have had previous contact with human beings, and have taken pains to avoid coming to their attention. We do not want to alarm or confuse them."

"But all the same, you rescued us."

"It was an emergency. We are not human, but we have, you might say, humanitarian feelings. We do not like to see creatures die, even inferior creatures--not that you are, of course," he added delicately. "Our ship happened to be only a few thousand miles away when it happened. We saw, and acted with great speed. Once you are whole again, we shall place you where you will be found by your own kind, and proceed on our way. By that time, our expedition will have been completed."

"When we are whole again--Doctor, will I be exactly the same as before?"

"In some ways, perhaps even better. I can assure you that all your organs will function perfectly."

"I don't mean that. I mean--will I look the same?"

She felt that there was astonishment in the pause. "Look the same? Does that matter?"

"Yes ... oh, yes, it matters! It matters more than anything else."

He must have been regarding her as if she were crazy. Suddenly she was glad that she had no eyes to see his bewilderment. And his contempt, which, she was sure, must be there too.

He said slowly, "I didn't realize. But, of course, we don't know how you did look. How can we make you look the same?"

"I don't know. But you must! You must!" Her voice rose, and she felt the pain in her throat as the new muscles constricted.

"You are getting hysterical," he said. "Stop thinking about this."

"But I can't stop thinking about it. It's the only thing I _can_ think of! I don't want to look any different from the way I did before!"

He said nothing, and suddenly she felt tired. A moment before she had been so excited, so upset; and now--merely tired and sleepy. She wanted to go to sleep and forget it all. _He must have given me a sedative_, she thought. _An injection? I didn't feel the prick of the needle, but maybe they don't use needles. Anyway, I'm glad he did. Because now I won't have to think, I won't be able to think--_

* * * * *

She slept. When she awoke again, she heard a new voice. A voice she couldn't place. It said, "Hello, Margaret. Where are you?"

"Who ... Fred!"

"Margaret?"

"Y-yes."

"Your voice is different."

"So is yours. At first I couldn't think who was speaking to me!"

"It's strange it took us so long to realize that our voices would be different."

She said shakily, "We're more accustomed to thinking of how we look."

He was silent. His mind had been on the same thing.

"Your new voice isn't bad, Fred," she said after a moment. "I like it. It's a little deeper, a little more resonant. It will go well with your personality. The Doctor has done a good job."

"I'm trying to think whether I like yours. I don't know. I suppose I'm the kind of guy who likes best what he's used to."

"I know. That's why I didn't want him to change my looks."

Again silence.

She said, "Fred?"

"I'm still here."

"Have you talked to him about it?"

"He's talked to me. He's told me about your being worried."

"Don't you think it matters?"

"Yes, I suppose it does. He told me he could do a good technical job--leave us with regular features and unblemished skins."

"That isn't what I want," she said fiercely. "I don't want the kind of regular features that come out of physiology books. I want my own features. I don't care so much about the voice, but I want my own face back!"

"That's a lot to ask for. Hasn't he done enough for us?"

"No. Nothing counts unless I have that. Do--do you think that I'm being silly?"

"Well--"

"I don't want to be beautiful, because I know you don't want me to be."

He sounded amazed. "Whoever told you that?"

"Do you think that after living with you for two years, I don't know? If you had wanted a beautiful wife, you'd have married one. Instead, you chose me. You wanted to be the good-looking one of the family. You're vain, Fred. Don't try to deny it, because it would be no use. You're vain. Not that I mind it, but you are."

"Are you feeling all right, Margaret? You sound--overwrought."

"I'm not. I'm being very logical. If I were either ugly or beautiful, you'd hate me. If I were ugly, people would pity you, and you wouldn't be able to stand that. And if I were beautiful, they might forget about you. I'm just plain enough for them to wonder why you ever married anyone so ordinary. I'm just the kind of person to supply background for you."

* * * * *

After a moment he said slowly, "I never knew you had ideas like that about me. They're silly ideas. I married you because I loved you."

"Maybe you did. But _why_ did you love me?"

He said patiently, "Let's not go into that. The fact is, Margaret, that you're talking nonsense. I don't give a damn whether you're ugly or beautiful--well, no, that isn't strictly true. I do care--but looks aren't the most important thing. They have very little to do with the way I feel about you. I love you for the kind of person you are."

Everything else is secondary."

"Please, Fred, don't lie to me. I want to be the same as before, because I know that's the way you want me. Isn't there some way to let the Doctor know what sort of appearance we made? You have--had--a good eye. Maybe you could describe us--"

"Be reasonable, Margaret. You ought to know that you can't tell anything from a description." His voice was almost pleading. "Let's leave well enough alone. I don't care if your features do come out of the pictures in a physiology textbook--"

"Fred!" she said excitedly. "That's it! Pictures! Remember that stereo shot we had taken just before we left Mars? It must be somewhere on the ship--"

"But the ship was crushed, darling. It's a total wreck."

"Not completely. If they could take _us_ out alive, there must have been some unhurt portions left. Maybe the stereo is still there!"

"Margaret, you're asking the impossible. We don't know where the ship is. This group the Doctor is with is on a scouting expedition. The wreck of our ship may have been left far behind. They're not going to retrace their tracks just to find it."

"But it's the only way ... the only way! There's nothing else--"

She broke down. If she had possessed eyes, she would have wept--but as it was, she could weep only internally.

They must have taken him away, for there was no answer to her tearless sobbing. And after a time, she felt suddenly that there was nothing to cry about. She felt, in fact, gay and cheerful--and the thought struck her: _The Doctor's given me another drug. He doesn't want me to cry. Very well, I won't. I'll think of things to make me happy, I'll bubble over with good spirits--_

Instead, she fell into a dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

When she awoke again, she thought of the conversation with Fred, and the feeling of desperation returned. _I'll have to tell the Doctor all about it_, she thought. _I'll have to see what he can do. I know it's asking an awful lot, but without it, all the rest he has done for me won't count. Better to be dead than be different from what I was._

But it wasn't necessary to tell the Doctor. Fred had spoken to him first.

So Fred admits it's important too. He won't be able to deny any longer that I judged him correctly.

The Doctor said, "What you are asking is impossible."

"Impossible? You won't even try?"

"My dear patient, the wrecked ship is hundreds of millions of miles

behind us. The expedition has its appointed task. It cannot retrace its steps. It cannot waste time searching the emptiness of space for a stereo which may not even exist any longer."

"Yes, you're right ... I'm sorry I asked, Doctor."

He read either her mind or the hopelessness in her voice. He said, "Do not make any rash plans. You cannot carry them out, you know."

"I'll find a way. Sooner or later I'll find a way to do something to myself."

"You are being very foolish. I cannot cease to marvel at how foolish you are. Are many human beings like you, psychologically?"

"I don't know, Doctor. I don't care. I know only what's important to me!"

"But to make such a fuss about the merest trifle! The difference in appearance between one human being and another of the same sex, so far as we can see, is insignificant. You must learn to regard it in its true light."

"You think it's insignificant because you don't know anything about men and women. To Fred and me, it's the difference between life and death."

He said in exasperation, "You are a race of children. But sometimes even a child must be humored. I shall see what I can do."

But what could he do? she asked herself. The ship was a derelict in space, and in it, floating between the stars, was the stereo he wouldn't make an attempt to find. Would he try to get a description from Fred? Even the best human artist couldn't produce much of a likeness from a mere verbal description. What could someone like the Doctor do--someone to whom all men looked alike, and all women?

* * * * *

As she lay there, thinking and wondering, she had only the vaguest idea of the passage of time. But slowly, as what must have been day followed day, she became aware of strange tingling sensations all over her body. The pains she had felt at first had slowly diminished and then vanished altogether. What she felt now was not pain at all. It was even mildly pleasant, as if some one were gently massaging her body, stretching her muscles, tugging at her--

Suddenly she realized what it was: New limbs were growing. Her internal organs must have developed properly, and now the Doctor had gone ahead with the rest of his treatment.

With the realization, tears began to roll down her cheeks. _Tears_, she thought, _real tears--I can feel them. I'm getting arms and legs, and I can shed tears. But I still have no eyes._

But maybe they're growing in.... From time to time I seem to see flashes of light. Maybe he's making them develop slowly, and he put the tear ducts in order first. I'll have to tell him that my eyes must be blue. Maybe I never was beautiful, but I always had pretty eyes. I don't want any different color. They wouldn't go with my face.

The next time the Doctor spoke to her, she told him.

"You may have your way," he said good-naturedly, as if humoring a child.

"And, Doctor, about finding the ship again--"

"Out of the question, as I told you. However, it will not be necessary." He paused, as if savoring what he had to tell her. "I checked with our records department. As might have been expected, they searched your shattered ship thoroughly, in the hope of finding information that might contribute to our understanding of your race. They have the stereos, about a dozen of them."

"A _dozen_ stereos? But I thought--"

"In your excitement, you may have forgotten that there were more than one. All of them seem to be of yourself and your husband. However, they were obviously taken under a wide variety of conditions, and with a wide variety of equipment, for there are certain minor differences between them which even I, with my non-human vision, can detect. Perhaps you can tell us which one you prefer us to use as a model."

She said slowly, "I had better talk about that with my husband. Can you have him brought in here, Doctor?"

"Of course."

* * * * *

She lay there, thinking. A dozen stereos. And there was still only one that she remembered. Only a single one. They had posed for others, during the honeymoon and shortly after, but those had been left at home on Mars before they started on their trip.

Fred's new voice said, "How are you feeling, dear?"

"Strange. I seem to have new limbs growing in."

"So do I. Guess we'll be our old selves pretty soon."

"Will we?"

She could imagine his forehead wrinkling at the intonation of her voice. "What do you mean, Margaret?"

"Hasn't the Doctor told you? They have the stereos they found on our ship. Now they can model our new faces after our old."

"That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"But what do _you_ want, Fred? I remember only a single one, and the Doctor says they found a dozen. And he says that my face differs from shot to shot."

Fred was silent.

"Are they as beautiful as all that, Fred?"

"You don't understand, Margaret."

"I understand only too well. I just want to know--were they taken before we were married or after?"

"Before, of course. I haven't gone out with another girl since our wedding."

"Thank you, dear." Her own new voice had venom in it, and she caught herself. _I mustn't talk like that_, she thought. _I know Fred, I know his weakness. I knew them before I married him. I have to accept them and help him, not rant at him for them._

He said, "They were just girls I knew casually. Good-looking, but nothing much otherwise. Not in a class with you."

"Don't apologize." This time her voice was calm, even amused. "You couldn't help attracting them. Why didn't you tell me that you kept their pictures?"

"I thought you'd be jealous."

"Perhaps I would have been, but I'd have got over it. Anyway, Fred, is there any one of them you liked particularly?"

* * * * *

He became wary, she thought. His voice was expressionless as he said, "No. Why?"

"Oh, I thought that perhaps you'd want the Doctor to make me look like her."

"Don't be silly, Margaret! I don't want you to look like anybody but yourself. I don't want to see their empty faces ever again!"

"But I thought--"

"Tell the Doctor to keep the other stereos. Let him put them in one of his museums, with other dead things. They don't mean anything to me any more. They haven't meant anything for a long time. The only reason I didn't throw them away is because I forgot they were there and didn't think of it."

"All right, Fred. I'll tell him to use our picture as a model."

"The AC studio shot. The close-up. Make sure he uses the right one."

"I'll see that there's no mistake."

"When I think I might have to look at one of _their_ mugs for the rest of my life, I get a cold sweat. Don't take any chances, Margaret. It's your face I want to see, and no one else's."

"Yes, dear."

I'll be plain, she thought, _but I'll wear well. A background always wears well. Time can't hurt it much, because there's nothing there to hurt._

There's one thing I overlooked, though. How old will we look? The Doctor is rather insensitive about human faces, and he might age us a bit. He mustn't do that. It'll be all right if he wants to make us a little younger, but not older. I'll have to warn him.

She warned him, and again he seemed rather amused at her.

"All right," he said, "you will appear slightly younger. Not too much so, however, for from my reading I judge it best for a human face to show not too great a discrepancy from the physiological age."

She breathed a sigh of relief. It was settled now, all settled. Everything would be as before--perhaps just a little better. She and Fred could go back to their married life with the knowledge that they would be as happy as ever. Nothing exuberant, of course, but as happy as their own peculiar natures permitted. As happy as a plain and worried wife and a handsome husband could ever be.

* * * * *

Now that this had been decided, the days passed slowly. Her arms and legs grew, and her eyes too. She could feel the beginnings of fingers and toes, and on the sensitive optic nerve the flashes of light came with greater and greater frequency. There were slight pains from time to time, but they were pains she welcomed. They were the pains of growth, of return to normalcy.

And then came the day when the Doctor said, "You have recovered. In another day, as you measure time, I shall remove your bandages."

Tears welled up in her new eyes. "Doctor, I don't know how to thank you."

"No thanks are needed. I have only done my work."

"What will you do with us now?"

"There is an old freighter of your people which we have found abandoned and adrift. We have repaired it and stocked it with food taken from your own ship. You will awaken inside the freighter and be able to reach your own people."

"But won't I--can't I even get the chance to see you?"

"That would be inadvisable. We have some perhaps peculiar ideas about keeping our nature secret. That is why we shall take care that you carry away nothing that we ourselves have made."

"If I could only--well, even shake hands--do _something_--"

"I have no hands."

"No hands? But how could you--how can you--do such complicated things?"

"I may not answer. I am sorry to leave you in a state of bewilderment, but I have no choice. Now, please, no more questions about me. Do you wish to talk to your husband for a time before you sleep again?"

"Must I sleep? I feel so excited.... I want to get out of bed, tear off my bandages, and see what I look like!"

"I take it that you are not anxious to speak to your husband yet."

"I want to see myself first!"

"You will have to wait. During your last sleep, your new muscles will be exercised, their tones and strength built up. You will receive a final medical examination. It is most important."

She started to protest once more, but he stopped her. "Try to be calm. I can control your feelings with drugs, but it is better that you control yourself. You will be able to give vent to your excitement later. And now I must leave you. You will not hear from me after this."

"Never again?"

"Never again. Goodbye."

For a moment she felt something cool and dry and rough laid very lightly against her forehead. She tried to reach for him, but could only twitch her new hands on her new wrists. She said, with a sob, "Goodbye, Doctor."

When she spoke again, there was no answer.

She slept.

* * * * *

This time, the awakening was different. Before she opened her eyes, she heard the creaking of the freighter, and a slight hum that might have come from the firing of the jets.

As she tried to sit up, her eyes flashed open, and she saw that she was lying in a bunk, strapped down to keep from being thrown out. Unsteadily, she began to loosen the straps. When they were half off, she stopped to stare at her hands. They were strong hands, well-shaped and supple, with a healthily tanned skin. She flexed them and unflexed them several times. Beautiful hands. The Doctor had done well by her.

She finished undoing the straps, and got to her feet. There was none of the dizziness she had expected, none of the weakness that would have been normal after so long a stay in bed. She felt fine.

She examined herself, staring at her legs, body--staring as she might have done at a stranger's legs and body. She took a few steps forward and then back. Yes, he had done well by her. It was a graceful body, and it felt fine. Better than new.

But her face!

She whirled around to locate a mirror, and heard a voice: "Margaret!"

Fred was getting out of another bunk. Their eyes sought each other's faces, and for a long moment they stared in silence.

Fred said in a choked voice, "There must be a mirror in the captain's

cabin. I've got to see myself."

[Illustration]

At the mirror, their eyes shifted from one face to the other and back again. And the silence this time was longer, more painful.

A wonderful artist, the Doctor. For a creature--a person--who was insensitive to the differences in human faces, he could follow a pattern perfectly. Feature by feature, they were as before. Size and shape of forehead, dip of hairline, width of cheeks and height of cheekbones, shape and color of eyes, contour of nose and lips and chin--nothing in the two faces had been changed. Nothing at all.

Nothing, that is, but the overall effect. Nothing but the fact that where before she had been plain, now she was beautiful.

I should have realized the possibility, she thought. _Sometimes you see two sisters, or mother and daughter, with the same features, the faces as alike as if they had been cast from the same mold--and yet one is ugly and the other beautiful. Many artists can copy features, but few can copy with perfect exactness either beauty or ugliness. The Doctor slipped up a little. Despite my warning, he's done too well by me._

And not well enough by Fred. Fred isn't handsome any more. Not ugly really--his face is stronger and more interesting than it was. But now I'm the good-looking one of the family. And he won't be able to take it. This is the end for us.

* * * * *

Fred was grinning at her. He said, "Wow, what a wife I've got! Just look at you! Do you mind if I drool a bit?"

She said uncertainly, "Fred, dear, I'm sorry."

"For what? For his giving you more than you bargained for--and me less? It's all in the family!"

"You don't have to pretend, Fred. I know how you feel."

"You don't know a thing. I _asked_ him to make you beautiful. I wasn't sure he could, but I asked him anyway. And he said he'd try."

"You _asked_ him--oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Are you sorry? I hoped he'd do better for me, but--well, did you marry me for my looks?"

"You know better, Fred!"

"I didn't marry you for yours either. I told you that before, but you wouldn't believe me. Maybe now you will."

Her voice choked. "Perhaps--perhaps looks aren't so important after all. Perhaps I've been all wrong about everything I used to think was essential."

"You have," agreed Fred. "But you've always had a sense of inferiority

about your appearance. From now on, you'll have no reason for that. And maybe now we'll both be able to grow up a little."

She nodded. It gave her a strange feeling to have him put around her a pair of arms she had never before known, to have him kiss her with lips she had never before touched. _But that doesn't matter_, she thought. _The important thing is that whatever shape we take, we're_ us. _The important thing is that now we don't have to worry about ourselves--and for that we have to thank_ him.

"Fred," she said suddenly, her face against his chest. "Do you think a girl can be in love with two--two people--at the same time? And one of them--one of them not a man? Not even human?"

He nodded, but didn't say anything. And after a moment, she thought she knew why. _A man can love that way too_, she thought--_and one of them not a woman, either_.

I wonder if he ... she ... it knew. I wonder if it knew.

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Bimmie Says

By SYDNEY VAN SCYOC

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Bimmie says people are stupid. Bimmie says he can help
them--but they're not really worth his trouble, Bimmie says.

June 27, 1982 Bimmie said to do this, keep a diary. I said, Cows? He
said, You deaf, woman? A book! Then I remembered, only I haven't seen
one. It's for when he's famous. Then we can have it published anytime
we need money.

I'd better tell about us. I'm short, sort of cute, and I cook good.
Bimmie's tall and skinny, he likes to eat. He's 18, I'm 16. We got
married 22 days ago. Instead of a fancy wedding, Bimmie told my folks,
Give us money.

He needed the money for his laboratory. It's in the basement. It's

what'll make him famous.

* * * * *

June 31, 1982 We got a cat and dog. They're black and two months old. I wanted red collars. Bimmie said, Don't waste my money, woman.

Bimmie wanted them down in his laboratory. He said that'd be proper conditions. I said, No, I'll leave if you do and you'll have to eat capsules.

The cat's he, the dog's she. Bimmie doesn't want them outside, ever.

* * * * *

July 3, 1982 We thought Bimmie's folks'd change their minds. But they said, Finally and conclusively, we won't. Bimmie says he doesn't want to go to college if they're stingy because we got married. He already knows everything important.

He wants me to finish school. I can finish in December. I thought when you got married you didn't have to, just slept late and fixed your hair.

* * * * *

July 9, 1982 The puppy's Susta, the cat's Sup. Susta's jealous because Sup jumps on the couch, and she can't.

Bimmie'll have to make pills for Susta. She hides from his needle. She'll be small. That's good, Bimmie says.

* * * * *

August 17, 1982 He just married me to cook! Every night he's in his laboratory. I'm always in this stupid, _ugly_ house.

* * * * *

August 18, 1982 Susta won't change for a long time. Bimmie has pills now.

* * * * *

September 1, 1982 School started. Frankie's still stuck on me. He says I'm sexy, that's why Bimmie married me. I said, He married me for my cooking. He laughed.

* * * * *

September 11, 1982 I felt funny again. I stopped by Momma's. She bets she knows what it is. She knew after ten days.

* * * * *

September 15, 1982 I had to ask the school nurse if it was that. She said, Yes, two weeks. I hope she's wrong. Babies are work. She said, But the fulfillment. I said, Changing sippy diapers is what you call fulfillment?

It doesn't show. Frankie winked at me.

* * * * *

September 17, 1982 The cat climbed those lace curtains Bimmie's mother gave us. Bimmie said it was my job to watch him. I said, That's a stupid way to spend my life. He said, I didn't marry you to have you sit around and do nothing.

Susta watched Sup and whined. She wants to be a cat.

* * * * *

September 27, 1982 Bimmie read my diary. He said there wasn't a June 31. He says to tell more about his work. It won't make money if he's not in it.

I told him about the baby. He said, Whoopee! He got some obstetrics books.

* * * * *

October 5, 1982 Bimmie expects the baby to kick already. I'm glad it doesn't! He made the puppy's pills tonight.

* * * * *

October 7, 1982 I let them outside. The smell in the house turns my stomach. I'm afraid to take the pills Bimmie made me.

* * * * *

October 9, 1982 I let them out again. There's a black dog next door with a long nose, ears like rosebuds and white feet. Susta was scared. Sup hissed.

* * * * *

October 25, 1982 Bimmie's so nice. He took me to a tridiversion. He hates them. He said, They're for the cloddy-minded masses. I said, Well, what are we?

I want a tridiversion wall. Bimmie says, No. We had a fight.

* * * * *

October 30, 1982 I took a pill Bimmie made. I felt good.

I let them out. It beats cleaning up. Susta played with that dog.

* * * * *

November 7, 1982 I went to Dr. Brantly. He hypnotized me. I don't remember it.

* * * * *

December 13, 1982 Susta's leaving spots. I thought, She's hurt. Bimmie explained and said, Don't let her out. He wants to wait till

next time to have puppies. He said, The treatment must take full effect first. He explained but I didn't understand.

* * * * *

January 5, 1983 I'm out of school. It's boring. Momma says I'm too young to settle down. She's crazy. I'm sixteen.

* * * * *

January 11, 1983 Bimmie's reading more obstetrics books. Hypnotism too. He tried to hypnotize me, but I went to sleep.

* * * * *

January 14, 1983 I wish Momma would stop. She said, Where're you going to put a baby, with only one bedroom. She cried and called me Baby. Gosh! She said, You shouldn't have cats around babies, you'll have to give him away.

Bimmie heard, from the bedroom. He came out. He said, I am conducting an important scientific experiment with the cat and dog. I would as soon give away the baby. Momma got white under her plasti-skin. She said, Bimmie, you're a monster for experimenting on dumb animals. And for rejecting your own child.

Then Sup climbed the curtains Momma gave us. She shrieked, You're ungrateful! and huffed out.

She came back later, asking us to forgive her. She said she wanted to help, since we're both still children. Well!

I do wonder where we'll put the baby. Maybe on the couch.

* * * * *

February 17, 1983 I had to tell Bimmie I was letting them out. Sup fought with the dog next door. Bimmie got mad. He told me, They must have a controlled environment. I said, It's hard for me to bend over to clean up. Finally he said he'd clean up and wasn't it funny Sup and that dog knew they were rivals.

I didn't know myself.

* * * * *

March 17, 1983 I saw Dr. Brantly today. He says I'm fine. I tried to remember him putting me in the trance, but I couldn't.

* * * * *

April 19, 1983 Saw Dr. Brantly. Sup pulled the curtains down. Susta isn't jealous any more, she's playing with a string.

* * * * *

May 9, 1983 I'm writing this next day. Last night I had this sharp pain. I said, Bimmie, call Dr. Brantly. I remember him looking at me funny. That's all I remember until I woke up in the hospital. Bimmie

was sitting beside me, looking proud. I asked him, What's happened? He grinned. We have a nine-pound son, he said. I named him after the man who delivered him. I said, Did I faint? That wasn't the way it was explained, just that Dr. Brantly would put me in a trance. Bimmie was too busy grinning to say, then he had to go to work. The doctor came in. I said, It wasn't bad, I only felt one pain. He frowned. I said, Can I see the baby? He said, Later. He went out too.

I thought I must have cussed.

I didn't understand until the nurse brought the baby. He had a little plastic bracelet that said Bimford Fost, Jr. He was red and squalling. I felt like doing the same, because I knew why Bimmie had been studying those obstetrics books. He has to try everything!

* * * * *

May 21, 1983 I'm seventeen today. Bimmie says to write more. He thinks that's all I have to do. The baby sleeps all the time he isn't crying. I like him, only I'm tired of diapers.

Susta gets three pills every day. She plays with them, then eats them. Bimmie said last night, It won't be long until my experiment bears fruit. He said to write that here.

* * * * *

June 3, 1983 Susta tried to climb the curtains.

* * * * *

June 5, 1983 Bimmie wanted to give the baby some pills he made. I said, No. He said, They'll make him smarter, woman. I said, He's enough trouble dumb.

Today was our first anniversary. Bimmie wouldn't buy me anything.

* * * * *

June 9, 1983 We fought about a dryer. After he left I said, For that I'll let your animals out. The dog next door came up. Susta arched her back.

* * * * *

June 21, 1983 I've been putting them out every day.

* * * * *

June 25, 1983 Bimmie says to write every day, his experiment is coming to a head. I can't see anything happening. Susta gets six pills now.

* * * * *

June 27, 1983 The dog's that way again. Bimmie said, At last my experiment shall be carried to completion. Not that I care for fame and riches, no, I care only for the accomplishment of something man has never before achieved. I said he didn't sound natural. He said, Put it

down that way, woman.

* * * * *

June 29, 1983 Bimmie wanted to feed the baby. I caught him before he gave him a pill. We fought. He said, Who delivered him? I said, I made him, and pointed to my stomach. I said, I won't have you using him like a guinea pig.

* * * * *

July 4, 1983 Bimmie says tomorrow we'll shut them up in the basement.

* * * * *

July 5, 1983 The funniest thing. Bimmie said, You put them in the basement. Then he left. I thought, I'll just take them out while I hang diapers. But when we went out, three dogs came up. I said, Scat! I couldn't chase them because I had my arms full of diapers, because Bimmie won't buy me a basket. They came closer, edging around. I stomped my feet and yelled. The dog next door came and growled. Then Sup hissed at him. This was the first the other three saw Sup. He hunched up, spitting and intending to chase them off. Only they took out after him instead. He ran off with four dogs after him. I couldn't do anything, my arms were full.

* * * * *

July 6, 1983 Bimmie didn't think it was funny. He yelled, What are you, stupid? Didn't you know dogs would come around? Didn't you know dogs chase cats? He took the car and called, Kitty, kitty, all over town. No luck. I said, Get another cat. He said, This one is used to Susta. I said, There'll be another time. He stared at me and said Susta's system would tolerate only so much of the stuff he's been giving her. He can't give her any more after next month. He'll have to wait another year. Then he went looking again.

That was last night. Maybe he'll come home tonight.

* * * * *

July 7, 1983 He hasn't. Bimmie's biting his fingernails. He'd bite harder if he knew what happened today.

I thought Susta was asleep when I went to hang diapers. I had my arms clear full. When I opened the door, Susta shot past me. I yelled at her, but she went flying down the street, and I saw that dog next door take off behind her. I thought first thing, It's Bimmie's fault for not buying a dryer.

I hung the clothes fast. After all, nothing could happen in such a short time. Then I started up the street calling, Here Susta! But the baby was alone, I had to hurry home.

She came back in half an hour. I didn't tell Bimmie yet.

* * * * *

July 8, 1983 I didn't tell him, still. He was mad because he had to

pay to get Sup out of the pound. Bimmie salved his ears, they were torn, and put them in the basement. He said, Now!

* * * * *

July 15, 1983 Bimmie says to write every day. It's dull, them in the basement. They come up tomorrow.

* * * * *

July 23, 1983 Susta acts funnier than ever. She rubs my legs when I'm cooking. She keeps wetting her paws and rubbing her face.

* * * * *

August 3, 1983 Today I caught Susta sharpening her claws on the couch. I said, Bimmie, look at the crazy dog, thinks she's a cat. He frowned. He only has one pimple now, he's kind of handsome. I said, Isn't it cute? Bimmie went downstairs. I think he was worried.

* * * * *

August 11, 1983 Susta's getting big. I let her sleep with the baby. Bimmie says, Whoopee! It worked! I'm scared to tell him now.

* * * * *

August 12, 1983 Susta rubs my leg when she's hungry. Then she sits and switches her tail for a long time.

* * * * *

August 17, 1983 Susta meowed today. I was fixing dinner. She looked up and said, Meow. It wasn't supposed to be this way. Bimmie's afraid she'll have kittens. That isn't what he's trying to do.

* * * * *

September 5, 1983 Susta wanted to go down in the basement this afternoon. When I called her for supper she came up with her stomach flat. Bimmie and I went down. Susta ducked back in a hole in the wall. There's a sort of little cave. We said, They must be in there. We got a flash, and we could see little black balls. Bimmie couldn't reach them.

Bimmie kept talking about how his experiment is going to revolutionize agriculture.

* * * * *

September 6, 1983 I can hear her meowing to them. We can see them with the flash. We can't tell anything yet.

* * * * *

September 7, 1983 He'll buy a typewriter but not a dryer! He's going to write a book about his experiment. He expects _me_ to type it.

* * * * *

September 10, 1983 She still won't bring them out. She purred today, rusty-like. Bimmie says, sometimes, It had to work. Other times he bites his nails.

He gave me ten pages to type. I thought I'd better.

* * * * *

September 13, 1983 I went down to call Susta and I saw them. There were five, wobbling everywhere. They're the cutest fat things. I picked one up, and then I felt sick. He had a long nose and little rosebud ears and white feet. He looked like the dog next door.

All of them do. They're all puppies. Nothing else, just puppies.

I put them in a box, and took them upstairs.

Bimmie's working tonight. I'll go to bed before he comes home.

* * * * *

September 14, 1983 He raved all morning and tromped around. I said, Shut up or I'll leave and you'll have to eat capsules. He said, I could eat dog food! Then he wanted to see my diary. I said, No. But he yanked out all the drawers and found it.

I took the baby and went to Momma's.

It was suppertime when I came home. He was on the couch with Sup and Susta and the puppies.

He didn't act mad, just nasty-nice. So you came home, he said. I never realized how limited you were, Listie. Your diary's shown me a lot. Can you at least find homes for the puppies?

I said, I guess. I put the baby down. He hadn't thrown anything or burned my diary.

He said, Good, then. I've fixed supper.

He had hamburger, frozen pie and hot chocolate. Some of it tasted bad. I didn't say anything.

* * * * *

September 15, 1983 I asked Bimmie, Should I quit my diary? He said, Yes. Then, No, keep on. I asked, was he doing another experiment? He said, Not yet. I said, Bim better not start talking early. He said, You don't think I'd experiment with my own child? I didn't know. He said, Bim might be smart anyway. I said, He might be, he's your son. It was a good compliment.

* * * * *

September 17, 1983 Bimmie wants to learn cooking. He said, You have to work hard, hanging diapers. It will help if I can cook.

I'll teach him hot chocolate first. His fixing tastes _awful_.

* * * * *

October 5, 1983 I have little to report. Bimford, Jr. is flourishing.
The puppies are adorable. Susta and Sup tend them jointly.

Bimmie has no new project. He has thrown all his energies into cooking.
He does quite well, except for hot chocolate, which still tastes of
chemicals.

I never, until yesterday, realized the intellectual and sensual joy to
be derived from delving into Greek drama.

* * * * *

November 9, 1983 Bimford, Jr. is six months old today. Since I
gave up the last puppy, the house seems barnlike in its emptiness. I
mentioned the fact to Bimford.

His glance was speculative. "I have some money saved. Want a
tridiversion wall?"

I was horrified. "Whatever for?"

He shrugged. "Maybe you'd like to go to the library. Get something to
read."

I considered. "Perhaps I will," I said. "There isn't much for me to
do, hang diapers and push buttons. Automation has almost completely
eliminated the housewife's traditional chores."

I left Bimford, Jr. with Mother and walked to the library. I asked the
librarian to show me about.

"What are you interested in?" she inquired.

"I don't know," I replied. "Do you have any good recent works on
chemistry or perhaps nuclear physics?"

She raised her eyebrows but conducted me to the proper shelf. After
finding several interesting volumes, I also checked out a volume on
cookery for Bimford. His hot chocolate doesn't improve, despite nightly
practice.

He tells me he is working on a new project.

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Collector's Item

By EVELYN E. SMITH

Illustrated by EMSH

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Being trapped in the steaming h—I of Venus is no excuse for forgetting one's manners—but anyone abducted, marooned, tricked, kept from tea might well crack under the strain!

"What I should like to know," Professor Bernardi said, gazing pensively after the lizard-man as he bore the shrieking form of Miss Anspacher off in his scaly arms, "is whether he is planning to eat her or make love to her. Because, in the latter instance, I'm not sure we should interfere. It may be her only chance."

"Carl!" his wife cried indignantly. "That's a horrid thing to say! You must rescue her at once!"

"Oh, I suppose so," he said, then gave his wife a nasty little grin that he knew would irritate her. "It isn't that she's unattractive, my dear, in case you hadn't noticed, though she's pretty well past the bloom of youth—"

"Will you stop making leering noises and go save her or not?"

"I was coming to that. It's just that she persists in using her Ph.D. as a club to beat men into respectful pulps. Men don't like being beaten into respectful pulps, whether by a man or a woman. Now if she'd only learned that other people have feelings—"

"If you don't stop lecturing and go, I will!" his wife threatened.

"All right, all right," he said wearily. "Come on, Mortland."

The two scientists slogged through the steamy, odorous jungle of Venus and soon reached the lizard-man, who, weighed down by his captive, had not been able to travel as fast.

"You blast him," the professor told Mortland. "Try not to hit Miss Anspacher, if you can manage it."

"Er—I've never fired one of these things before," Mortland said. "Can't stand having my eardrums blasted. However, here goes." He pointed his weapon at the lizardlike creature in a gingerly manner. "Ah—hands up," he ordered. "Only fair to give the—well, blighter a sporting chance," he explained to Professor Bernardi.

To their amazement, the lizard-man promptly dropped Miss Anspacher into the lavender-colored mud and put up his hands. Miss Anspacher gave an indignant yelp.

"Seems intelligent in spite of the kidnaping," Mortland commented. "But how does he happen to understand English? We're the only expedition ever to have reached Venus ... that I know of, anyway." He and the professor stared at each other in consternation. "There may have been a secret expedition previously and perhaps they left a—a base or something, which would explain why—"

"If you two oafs would stop speculating, you might help me out of here!" Miss Anspacher remarked in her customary snappish tone. Professor Bernardi leaped forward to obey. "You don't have to pull quite so hard! I haven't taken root yet!" She came out of the mud with a sound like two whales kissing. She brushed hopelessly at her once-white blouse and shorts. "Oh, dear, I look a mess!"

Professor Bernardi did not comment, being engaged in slapping at a small winged creature—about the size of a bluejay, but looking like a cross between a bat and a mosquito—that seemed interested in taking a bite out of him. It escaped his flapping hand and flew to the top of Mortland's sun helmet, where it glared at the professor.

"Since you seem to understand English," Miss Anspacher said to the lizard-man through a mouthful of hairpins, "perhaps you will be so kind as to explain the meaning of this outrage?"

"I was smitten," the alien replied suavely. "Passion made me forget myself."

Professor Bernardi looked thoughtfully at him. "A prior expedition isn't the answer. It wouldn't have troubled to educate you so thoroughly. Therefore, the explanation is that you pick up English by reading our minds. Correct?"

The lizard-man turned an embarrassed olive. "Yes."

Now that he was able to give the creature a more thorough inspection, Bernardi saw that he really didn't look too much like a lizard. He definitely appeared to be wearing clothes of some kind, which, in the Venusian heat, indicated a particularly refined degree of civilization—unless, of course, the squamous skin protected him from the heat as well as the humidity.

More than that, though, he was humanoid in almost a Hollywood way. He had a particularly fine profile and an athletic physique, which, oddly, his scales seemed to enhance, much like a movie idol dressed in fine-meshed Medieval armor. Naturally, he had a tail, but it was as well proportioned as a kangaroo's, though shorter and more graceful, and it struck Professor Bernardi as a particularly handsome and useful gadget.

For one thing, the people from Earth were standing uncomfortably in the slippery mud, while the lizard-man was using his tail much in the fashion of a spectator stool, leaning back against it almost in a sitting position, with his armor-shod feet supporting him comfortably. For another, the tail undoubtedly served for balance and the added push of a walking stick and perhaps for swift attack or getaway. Very practical and attractive, the professor concluded—too bad Man had relinquished his tail when climbing down from the trees.

"Thank you," the saurian said with uneasy modesty, looking at him. "Good of you to think so. You are a fairly intelligent species, aren't you?"

"Fairly," the professor acknowledged, preoccupied with a clever idea. Perhaps existence on Venus wasn't going to be as unpleasant as he had anticipated. "From reading my mind, you know what this blaster can do, don't you?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Then you know what I expect of you?"

"Yes, sahib. I'se comin', massa. To hear is to obey, effendi." The creature turned and went briskly back toward the camp, leaving the others to stumble after him.

Mrs. Bernardi gave a shriek as his handsome scaled form emerged from the greenish-white underbrush, haloed in luminous yellow mist. Algol, the ship's cat, prudently took sanctuary behind her, then peered out to see what was going on and whether there was likely to be anything in it for him.

"This is our native bearer," Professor Bernardi explained as the three scientists burst out of the jungle.

"My name is Jrann-Pttt." The creature bowed low. "At your service, madame."

"Oh, Carl!" Mrs. Bernardi clapped her hands. "He's just perfect! So thoughtful of you to find one that speaks English! I do hope you can cook, Pitt?"

"I will do my best, madame."

Algol daintily picked his way through the mud toward the saurian, sniffed him with judicial deliberation; then, deciding that anyone who smelled so much like the better class of fish must be All Right, rubbed against his legs.

"Well," remarked Miss Anspacher, using the side of the spaceship as a mirror by which to redden her somewhat prissy lips, "that makes it practically unanimous, doesn't it?"

"All except Professor Bernardi," said Jrann-Pttt, looking at the scientist with what might have been a smile. "He doesn't like me."

"I see that your telepathic powers are not quite accurate," the professor returned. "I do not dislike you; I distrust you."

"The fact that the two terms are not entirely synonymous in your language would argue a certain degree of incipient civilization," the lizard-man observed.

"You know, Carl," Mrs. Bernardi whispered, "he has an awfully funny way of talking, for a native."

"Frankly I don't like this at all, Professor," Captain Greenfield said, mopping his brow with a limp handkerchief. "If I hadn't been off looking for a better berth for the ship—all this mud worries me—this'd never have happened."

"You mean you would have let the lizard get away with Miss Anspacher?"

The big man's face flushed crimson. "I don't think that's funny, Professor."

Bernardi quickly changed the subject, for he realized that the captain, being by far the most muscular of the party, was not a man to trifle with. "Tell me, Greenfield, did you succeed in finding a better spot for the ship? I must admit I'm worried about that mud myself."

"Only remotely dry spot around is an outcropping 'bout two kilometers away," Greenfield said grudgingly. He shifted his camp stool in a futile search for shade. Even though the sun never penetrated the thick layer of clouds, the yellow light diffused through them was blinding. "Might be big enough, but it's not level. Could blast it smooth, but that'd take at least a week—Earth time."

Bernardi pulled his damp shirt away from his body. "Well, I daresay we'll be all right where we are, if we're not

assailed by any violent forces of nature. On Earth, this might be a monsoon climate."

"If you ask me, that monster is more of a danger than any monsoon."

Bernardi sighed. Although by far the most competent officer available for the job of spaceship captain, Greenfield was not quite the man he would have chosen to be his associate for months on end. Still, beggars—as Miss Anspacher might have eloquently put it—could not be choosers. "What makes you say that?" he asked, trying to set an example of tolerance.

"Don't like the idea of him cooking for us," the captain said stubbornly. "Might poison us all in our beds."

"Well, don't eat in your bed," suggested Mortland, strolling out of the airlock in the company of the cat. Algol, however, finding that the spot beside the captain's camp stool was as dry as anything could be on Venus, decided to turn back.

"The difficulty is easily overcome, Captain," the professor said, still holding on to his patience. "You can continue to cook your own meals from the tinned and packaged foods on board ship. The rest of us will eat fresh native foods prepared by Jrann-Pttt."

"But why," Miss Anspacher interrupted as she emerged from the airlock with a large cast-iron skillet, "should you think Jrann-Pttt wants to poison us?"

Both men rose from their stools. "Stands to reason he'd consider us his enemies, Miss Anspacher," the captain said. "After all, we—as a group, that is—captured him."

"Hired him," Professor Bernardi contradicted. "I've telepathically arranged to pay him an adequate salary. In goods, of course; I don't suppose our money would be of much use to him. And I think he's rather glad of the chance to hang around and observe us conveniently."

"Observe us!" Greenfield exclaimed. "You mean he's spying out the land for an attack? Let's prepare our defenses at once!"

"I doubt if that's what he has in mind," Professor Bernardi said judiciously.

"He may be staying because he wants to be near me," Miss Anspacher blurted. Overcome by this unmaidenly admission, she reddened and rushed from them, calling, "Yoo-hoo, Jrann-Pttt! Here is the frying pan!" Algol woke up instantly and followed her. "Frying" was one of the more important words in his vocabulary.

Captain Greenfield stared across the clearing after them, then turned back to Bernardi with a frown. "I don't like to see one of our girls mixed up with a lizard—and a foreign lizard at that." But his face too clearly betrayed a personal resentment.

"Don't tell me you have a—a fondness for Miss Anspacher, Captain," Professor Bernardi exclaimed, genuinely surprised. Undeniably Miss Anspacher—although no longer in her first youth—was a handsome woman, but he would not have expected her somewhat cerebral type to appeal to the captain. On the other hand, she was the only unattached woman in the party and they were a long way from home.

Greenfield picked a fleck of dried violet mud from the side of the ship and avoided Bernardi's eye. "One of the reasons I came along," he said almost bashfully. "Thought I'd have the chance to be alone with her now and again and impress her with, with...."

"Your sterling qualities?" Bernardi suggested.

The captain flashed him a glance of mingled gratitude and resentment. "And now this damned lizard has to come along!"

"Cheer up, Captain," said the professor. "I'll back you against a lizard any time."

Although the long twilight of Venus had deepened into night and it could never really be cool there by terrestrial

standards, the temperature was almost comfortable. Everything was quite black, except for the pallid purple campfire glowing through the darkness; the clouds that perpetually covered the surface of the planet prevented even the light of the stars from reaching it.

"Tell me more about the cross-versus the parallel-cousin relationships in your culture, Jrann-Pttt," Miss Anspacher breathed, wriggling her camp stool closer to the saurian's. "Anthropology is a great hobby of mine, you know. How do your people feel about exogamy?"

"I'm afraid I'm rather exhausted, dear lady," he said, using one arm to mask a yawn, and one to surreptitiously wave away the saurian head that was peering out of the underbrush. "I shouldn't like to give a scientist like yourself any misinformation that might become a matter of record."

"Of course not," she murmured. "You're so considerate."

A pale face appeared in the firelight like some weird creature of darkness. Terrestrial and extraterrestrial both started. "Miss Anspacher," the captain growled, "I'd like to lock up the ship, so if you wouldn't mind turning in—"

Miss Anspacher pouted. "You've interrupted such an interesting conversation. And I don't see why you have to lock up the ship. After all, the night is three hundred and eighty-five hours long. We don't sleep all that time and it would be a shame to be cooped up."

"I'm going to try to rig up some floodlights," Greenfield explained stiffly, "so we won't be caught like this again. Nobody bothered to tell me the day equals thirty-two of ours, so that half of it would be night."

"Then I won't see you for almost two weeks of our time, Jrann-Pttt? Are you sure you wouldn't like to spend the rest of the night in our ship? Plenty of room, you know."

"No, thank you, dear lady. The jungle is my natural habitat. I should feel stultified by walls and a ceiling. Don't worry—I shan't run away."

"Oh, I'm not worried," Miss Anspacher said coyly, throwing a stick of wood on the fire.

"Small riddance if he does."

"Captain Greenfield!"

That part of the captain's face not concealed by his piratical black beard turned red. "Well, if he can read our minds, he knows damn well what I'm thinking, anyway, so why be hypocritical about it?"

"That's right—he is a telepath, isn't he?" Miss Anspacher's face grew even redder than the captain's. "I forgot he.... It is getting late. I really must go. Good night, Jrann-Pttt."

"Good night, dear lady." The saurian bowed low over her hand.

Leaning on the captain's brawny arm, Miss Anspacher ploughed through the mud to the ship, followed by the mosquito-bat and Algol, who had been toasting themselves more or less companionably at the fire. The door to the airlock clanged behind all four of them.

The other saurian's head appeared again from the bush. Jrann-Pttt, the insistent thought came, shall I rescue you now?

Why, Dfar-LII? I am not a prisoner. I'm quite free to come and go as I please. But let's get away from the strangers' ship while we communicate. They do have a certain amount of low-grade perception and might be able to sense the presence of another personality. At any rate, they might look out of a port and see you.

Keeping the illuminator on low beam, Dfar-LII led the way through the bushes. Seems to me you're going to an awful lot of trouble just to get zoo specimens, the youngster protested, disentangling its arms from the embrace of an amorous vine. There's really no reason for carrying on the work since Lieutenant Merglyt-Ruuu ... passed on.

Jrann-Pttt sat down on a fallen log and, tucking up his graceful tail, signaled his junior to join him. In the event that we do decide to return to base, some handsome specimens might serve to offset the lieutenant's demise.

Return to base? But I thought we were....

We haven't found swamp life pleasant, have we? After all, there's no real reason why we shouldn't go back. Is it our fault that Merglyt-Ruuu happened to meet with a fatal accident?

We-ell ... but will the commandant see it that way?

On the other hand, if we don't go back, wouldn't it be a good idea to attach ourselves to an expedition that, no matter how alien, is better equipped for survival than we? And carrying out our original purpose seemed the best way of getting to meet these strangers informally, as it were.

They are unquestionably intelligent life-forms then?

After a fashion. Jrann-Pttt yawned and rose. But why are we sitting here? Let's start back to our camp. We will be able to converse more comfortably.

They made their way through the jungle—now walking, now wading where the mud became water. Small creatures with hardly any thoughts scurried before them as they went.

The commandant may have already made contact with their rulers, Dfar-Lll suggested, springing forward to illuminate the way. In that case, we couldn't hope to remain undiscovered for long.

Oh, these creatures are not Venusians. There's no intelligent life here. They hail from the third planet of this system and, according to their thoughts, this is the only vessel that was capable of traversing interplanetary space. So we needn't worry about extradition treaties or any other official annoyances.

If they're friendly, why didn't you spend the night in their ship? It certainly looks more comfortable than our collapsible moslak—which, by the way, collapsed while you were gone. I hope we'll be able to put it up again ourselves. I must say this for the lieutenant—he was good at that sort of thing.

Jrann-Pttt made a gesture of distaste. He was unfortunately good at other things, too. But let's not discuss him. I'm not staying with the strangers because I want to pick up one or two little things—mostly some of our food to serve them. I used up all the supplies in my pack and I want them to think we're living off the land. They believe me to be a primitive and it's best that they should until I decide just how I'm going to make most efficient use of them. Besides, I didn't want to leave you alone.

The younger saurian sniffed skeptically.

"Honestly, Pitt," Mrs. Bernardi said, keeping to leeward of the tablecloth the lizard-man was efficiently shaking out of the airlock, "I've never had a—an employee as competent as you." But the word she had in mind, of course, was "servant." "I do wish you'd come back to Earth with us."

"Perhaps you would compel me to come?" he suggested, as Algol and the mosquito-bat entered into hot competition to catch the crumbs before they sank into the purple ooze.

"Oh, no! We'd want you to come as our guest—our friend." Naturally, her thoughts ran, a house guest would be expected to help with the washing up and lend a hand with the cooking—and, of course, we wouldn't have to pay him. Though my husband, I suppose, would requisition him as a specimen.

I fully intend to go to Earth with them, Jrann-Pttt mused, but certainly not in that capacity. Nor would I care to be a specimen. I must formulate some concrete plan.

The captain was crawling on top of the spaceship, scraping off the dried mud, brushing away the leaves and dust that marred its shining purity. The hot, humid haze that poured down from the yellow clouds made the metal surface a little hell. Yet it was hardly less warm on the other side of the clearing, where Miss Anspacher tried

desperately to write up her notes on a table that kept sinking into the spongy ground, and hindered by the thick wind that had arisen half an hour before and which kept blowing her papers off. The sweet odor of the flowers tucked in the open neck of her already grimy white blouse suddenly sickened her and she flung them into the mud.

"We won't be going back to Earth for a long time!" she called. Gathering up the purple-stained papers, she came toward the others, little puffs of mist rising at each step. "We like it here. Lovely country."

How could she think to please even the savage she fancied him to be by such an inanity, Jrann-Pttt wondered. No one could possibly like that fetid swamp. Or was it not so much that she was trying to please him as convince herself? Was there some reason the terrestrials had for needing to like Venus. It hovered on the edge of the women's minds. If only it would emerge completely, he could pick it up, but it lurked in the shadows of their subconscious, tantalizing him.

"I'd like to know when we're going to start putting up the shelters," Mrs. Bernardi said, pushing a streak of fog-yellow hair out of her eyes. "I can't stand being cooped up for another night on that ship."

"You're planning to put up shelters—to live outside of the ship?" This would seem to confirm his darkest suspicions. Even a temporary settlement would leave them too open to visitation from the commandant. What his attitude toward the aliens might be, Jrann-Pttt didn't know. He might consider them as specimens, as enemies or as potential allies. What his attitude toward Jrann-Pttt and his companion would be, however, the saurian knew only too well. Had they reported the lieutenant's demise immediately, it was possible the commandant might have been brought to believe it was an accident. Now he would unquestionably think Jrann-Pttt had killed Merglyt-Ruuu on purpose—which was not true; how was Jrann-Pttt to know that the mud into which he'd knocked the lieutenant was quicksand?

"Anything against putting up shelters?" Captain Greenfield growled from his perch.

"Monster!" the mosquito-bat shrieked at the cat. "Monster! Monster!"

There was a painfully embarrassed silence.

"The creature is not intelligent," Jrann-Pttt explained, smiling. "It merely has vocal apparatus that can reproduce a frequently heard word, like—you have a bird, I believe, a—" he searched their minds for the word—"a parrot."

"Monster!" the mosquito-bat continued. "Monster! Monster!"

"Shut up or I'll wring your neck!" the captain snarled. The mosquito-bat obeyed sullenly, apparently recognizing the threat in his tone.

But the concept of "monster" hung heavily in the air between the terrestrials and the lizard-man. They should not feel so bad about it, he thought, for they are the monsters themselves. But that would never occur to them and I can hardly reassure them by saying....

"Don't worry," Professor Bernardi said smoothly. "To him, it's we who are the monsters."

A sudden gust of wind nearly whipped the tablecloth out of Jrann-Pttt's hands. He fought with it for a moment, glad of something tangible to contend with. "About the shelters," he said. "They might not stand up against a storm."

"So this is monsoon country," Bernardi observed thoughtfully. "Do you know when the storms usually come, Jrann-Pttt?" The other shook his head. "Peculiar. There usually is a season for that sort of thing."

"I ... come from another part of the planet."

"Storms here are bad, eh?" the captain commented, swinging himself down easily. "Frankly, that worries me. Ship's resting on mud as far as I can see, and if there's one thing I do know something about, it's mud. If it got any wetter, the ship might sink."

"Maybe we should leave," Mrs. Bernardi suggested. "Go to another part of the planet where it's drier, or—" she tried not to show the sudden surge of hope—"leave for home and come back after the rainy season."

There was a sudden silence, and Jrann-Pttt found himself able to pick up the answers to some of his questions from the alien minds. His worst fears were confirmed. Plan A was out. But something could still be done with these creatures.

"Doesn't she know?" the captain demanded accusingly. "You brought her here without telling her?"

Bernardi spread his hands wide in a futile gesture. "She should know; I've told her repeatedly. She just doesn't understand ... or doesn't want to."

"I know they'll forgive us," Mrs. Bernardi said stubbornly. "We—you—haven't done anything really wrong, so how could they do anything terrible to us? After all, didn't they refuse you the funds because they said you couldn't—"

"Shhh, Louisa," her husband commanded.

Jrann-Pttt smiled to himself.

—"do it," she went on. "And you did. So they were wrong and they'll have to forgive us."

"Tcha!" Miss Anspacher said. "Since when was there any fairness in justice?"

"On the other hand," Mrs. Bernardi continued, "we have no idea of how dangerous the storms here could be."

"Very dangerous," Jrann-Pttt said.

"For you, perhaps," the captain retorted. "Maybe not for us."

"Now that's silly," Miss Anspacher said. "You can see that Jrann-Pttt is much more—" she blushed—"sturdily built than we are."

"I don't mean that we could face it without protection," the captain replied angrily. "Naturally I mean that our superior technology could cope with the effects of any storm."

"Well, Captain, we'll have to put that superior technology to use at once," the professor told him. "You'd better start blasting that rock."

Laden with equipment and malevolent thoughts, the captain trudged off into the murky jungle. The others would not even offer to help. Confounded scientists; they certainly took his status as captain seriously. He wished, for a disloyal moment, that he had stayed on Earth. The quiet routine of a test pilot had prepared him for nothing like this. Were Miss Anspacher and adventure worth it? At the moment, he thought not. But he was on Venus and it was too late to change his mind.

Jrann-Pttt followed him into the jungle, keeping some distance behind, for he had good reason to suspect that Greenfield would take his warm interest in terrestrial technology for plain spying. Or, worse yet, he might try to press the lizard-man into service; Jrann-Pttt felt he had demeaned himself quite enough already.

"Have you noticed," Miss Anspacher asked, pushing the mass of damp brown hair off her neck as she came alongside him, "how the—the smell—" a scientist does not mince words—"of the swamp has grown stronger?"

Jrann-Pttt halted. He had a good idea of what the captain's reactions to the sight of himself and Miss Anspacher arriving hand-in-hand would be. "Yes, it is getting rather overpowering. Perhaps, for a lady of your delicate sensibilities, it would be best to—"

"I can stand a bad smell just as well as a male—any male!"

"Perhaps even better," Jrann-Pttt said, "for I was on the verge of turning back myself."

"Oh," she said, appeased. "Well, in that case, I'll go back with you ... how quiet everything is!"

He had not noticed. For him, it would never be quiet because of the stream of jangled thoughts constantly pouring into the back of his mind from everything sentient that surrounded him.

For a moment, he wondered what it would be like to be non-telepathic like the terrestrials, to have peace from the clamor of confused impressions, emotions and ideas that persistently beat at his mind. But that would be wondering how it was to be deaf to avoid discord, or blind to shut out ugliness.

"The lull before the storm, I suppose," she said brightly. Now is his opportunity to kiss me—only perhaps they don't have kissing in his society. His mouth does seem to be the wrong shape. And if I kissed him, it might violate a taboo.

During their short absence, the citrine clouds that closed off the sky had changed to a sinister umber. It was now almost as dusky in the clearing as in the jungle itself, when Jrann-Pttt and Miss Anspacher returned and joined the others.

Professor Bernardi stood looking up with sharp gray eyes at a sky he could not see. "I hope Greenfield can finish the blasting more quickly than he estimated," he muttered.

"Will we hear the noise way out here, Carl?" his wife worried nervously.

"Only two kilometers away? Of course we'll hear it. I do wish you wouldn't always be asking such stupid questions."

She shivered. "Well, I hope they get it over with right away. If we just have to sit here waiting and waiting and waiting, I'll go mad. I know I will."

"You should try to keep your nerves in check, Louisa," Miss Anspacher snapped. Silly little fool.

"At least I can control my glands!" Mrs. Bernardi flared back. Sex-starved spinster.

"I shall make some tea, ladies," Jrann-Pttt interposed. "I'm sure we will all feel the better for it."

Mrs. Bernardi smiled at him feebly. "You're such a comfort, Pitt. I don't know why you of all creatures should be the one to remind me of home."

"Home," remarked Mortland, emerging from the airlock, "is where the heart is. Did I hear someone say 'tea'?"

As Jrann-Pttt hung the kettle over the fire, suddenly the air erupted in stunning violence of sound. The ground undulated under their feet and water slopped out of the kettle, almost putting out the fire that rose high to claw at it. Rivulets of thick, muddy liquid welled out of the ground and drabbled their feet. The women turned pale. Algol gave a faint cry and hid under Mrs. Bernardi's skirts, trembling, while the mosquito-bat tried to lift Mortland's toupee and hide in his hair. The ship itself quivered and seemed to jump slightly in the air, then returned to its resting place.

All was quiet again, quieter than it had been before. Mortland anxiously gnawed his light mustache. "Better hurry with that tea, there's a good fellow. I'm violently allergic to loud noises."

"They'll probably continue all day," the professor said with almost malevolent cheerfulness, "so you might as well get used to them." Who is he to have nerves? I am easily the most sensitive person here, but I manage to control myself.

"I don't know how I'm going to stand it!" Mrs. Bernardi shrieked. "I just know something terrible is going to happen."

"Please try to restrain yourself, Louisa," her husband ordered. "After it's over, you'll find we'll be much more comfortable and secure with the ship resting on rock."

"If you ask me, that blast made it sink a little," Mortland said. "I wonder whether—"

He was interrupted by a thrashing in the bushes. Dfar-LII burst forth, shedding scales. Do not despair, Jrann-Pttt. I am here, ready to save you or die at your side.

The women clutched each other, Miss Anspacher praying silently and fervently to Juno, Lakshmi, Freya, Isis and a host of other esoteric female deities she had picked up in the course of her avocational researches.

"He seems to be one of Jrann-Pttt's people," Bernardi observed, "so there should be nothing to fear."

Dfar-LII, you fool! Jrann-Pttt ideated angrily. Nothing's wrong. They're just blasting out a better berth for their vessel. And now you've spoiled my plans.

"What did you think at that poor little creature!" Mrs. Bernardi blazed. "He's crying!" And, sure enough, amethyst tears were oozing out of the young saurian's large, liquid eyes.

I du-didn't mean any harm.

"Monster!" Mrs. Bernardi accused Jrann-Pttt. "All men are monsters, whether they're aliens or not."

"You're so right, Louisa!" Miss Anspacher exclaimed, regarding the younger creature in an almost kindly manner.

I'm sorry, r-LII, Jrann-Pttt apologized. I was upset by that noise, too. How could you possibly know what it was? Come, let me introduce you to the creatures.

Dfar-LII stepped forward diffidently. Jrann-Pttt put a hand on the moss-green shoulder. "Allow me to introduce my companion, Dfar-LII," he said aloud.

The youngster looked at him.

Mrs. Bernardi thrust out her hand. "I'm very glad to meet you, Lil."

Agitate it with one of yours. It's a courtesy. Don't let her see how repulsive she is to you. Remember, you're just as repulsive to her.

Dfar-LII offered a shy, seven-fingered hand. "Pleased ... to meet you ... ma'am," the young lizard squeaked.

"Why, he's just a baby, isn't he?" Mrs. Bernardi asked.

I am not a baby! Dfar-LII thought indignantly. At the end of this year, I shall celebrate my pre-maturity feast, or I would have. And furthermore—

There was another thunderous blast of sound. After the ground had stopped trembling, the six found themselves ankle-deep in muddy water. Algol, who was in considerably deeper than his ankles, mewed fretfully. Mrs. Bernardi picked him up and comforted him.

"Perhaps blasting wasn't such a good idea," the professor muttered. "Maybe I should tell Greenfield to call a halt and we'll take our chances with the storm. As a matter of fa—"

"The ship!" Mortland cried. "It is sinking!"

And the big metal ball slowly but visibly was indeed subsiding into the mud.

"Stop it, somebody!" Miss Anspacher snapped in her customary schoolroom manner.

The professor was pale, but he held on to his calm. "What can we do? Even if we could get the captain back in time, there's no way we can stop it. It's too heavy to pull out manually, and the engines, of course, are inside."

As they watched in horror, the ship sank deeper and deeper, picking up momentum as more of it went under.

With a loud, sucking sound, it vanished into the ooze. Muddy water gurgled over it and, where the ship had been, there was now a small lake.

"This could be the beginning of a legend," Miss Anspacher murmured. "Or the end."

There was another vibrant detonation. "Someone ought to go tell the captain there's no use blasting any more," Bernardi said wearily. "We have nothing to put on the rock when he smooths it off." He began to laugh. "I suppose you could call this poetic justice." And he went on laughing, losing a bit of his former self-control.

There goes Plan B, Jrann-Pttt thought.

A star of intensely bright green lightning split the clouds and widened to cover the visible expanse of sky. There was a planet-shaking clap of thunder that made Greenfield's puny efforts sound like the snapping of twigs in comparison and it began to rain hard and fast.

"If only I hadn't gone and blasted that damn rock," the captain grumbled, squeezing water out of his shirt-tails, "we'd have been all right. Probably the storm wouldn't have done a thing to the ship except get it wet. If you can even call it a storm."

"I can and I do," Jrann-Pttt replied, haughtily squeegeeing his wet scales. "All I said was that a storm might be coming up and it might be dangerous. How was I to know it would last only half an hour?"

"Even the camp stools pulled through," Greenfield pointed out, "and you said shelters wouldn't stand up."

"I only said they might not. Can't you understand your own language?"

The fissure in the clouds had not quite closed yet and through it the enormous, blazing disk of the sun glared at them, twice as large as it appeared from Earth. It was a moot point as to whether they'd be dried out or steamed alive first.

"Might as well collect whatever gear we have left and get it to higher ground," Miss Anspacher said efficiently. "Two feet of water won't do anything any good—even those camp stools."

"It's my belief you wanted this to happen," Greenfield accused Jrann-Pttt. "You wanted to get rid of us."

"My dear fellow," Jrann-Pttt replied loftily, "the information I gave you was, to the best of my knowledge, accurate. However, I happen to be a professor of zoology and not a meteorologist. Apparently you people live out in the open like primitives," he continued, ignoring Dfar-Lll's admiring interjection, "and are accustomed to the vicissitudes of weather. I am a civilized creature; I live—" or used to live—"in an air-conditioned, light-conditioned, weather-conditioned city. It is only when I rough it on field trips like this to trackless parts of the—globe that I am forced to experience weather. Even then, I have never before been caught in a situation like this."

In fact, I was never before caught or I wouldn't be in this situation at all.

"Oh, Jrann-Pttt," sighed Miss Anspacher, "I knew you couldn't be just an ordinary native!"

"How did you get into this situation then?" Professor Bernardi asked. He had an unfortunate talent for going directly to the point.

"The third member of our expedition died," Jrann-Pttt explained. "He was our dirigitional expert. Our guide."

"How did he happen to—"

"Are we just going to stand here chatting," Miss Anspacher demanded, "or are we going to do something about this?"

"What can we do?" Mrs. Bernardi asked weakly. "We might just as well lie down and—"

"Never say die, Louisa," Miss Anspacher admonished.

"I suggest we go to my camp to see what shape it's in," Jrann-Pttt said, furiously putting together Plan C. "Some of the supplies there might prove useful."

Captain Greenfield looked questioningly at Bernardi. The professor shrugged. "Might as well."

"All right," the captain growled. "Let's pick up whatever we can save."

Since there wasn't much that could be rescued, the little safari was soon on its way. Jrann-Pttt led, carrying Algol in his arms. Behind came Mortland, bearing a camp stool and the kettle into which he had tucked a tin of biscuits and into which the mosquito-bat had tucked itself, its orange eyes glaring out angrily from beneath the lid. Next came Mrs. Bernardi with her knitting, her camp stool and her sorrow.

Dfar-LII followed with two stools and the plastic tea set. Close behind was Miss Anspacher, with the sugar bowl, the earthenware teapot and an immense bound volume of the Proceedings of the Physical Society of Ameranglis for 1993. Professor Bernardi bore a briefcase full of notes and the table. The rain had damaged the latter's mechanism, so that its legs kept unfolding from time to time, to the great inconvenience of Captain Greenfield, who brought up the rear with the blasting equipment. Behind them and sometimes alongside them came something—or someone—else.

"Surely your camp must have been closer to ours than this," Miss Anspacher finally remarked after they had been slogging through mud and water and pushing aside reluctant vegetation for over an Earth hour.

"I am very much afraid," Jrann-Pttt admitted, "that our camp has been lost—that is to say, inundated."

"What are we going to do now?" the captain asked of the company at large.

Professor Bernardi shrugged. "Our only course would seem to be making for one of the cities and throwing ourselves upon the na—Jrann-Pttt's people's hospitality. If Professor Jrann-Pttt has even the vaguest idea of the direction in which his home lies, we might as well head that way." I wonder whether the natives could help us raise the ship.

"I'm sure my people will be more than happy to welcome you," Jrann-Pttt said smoothly, "and to make you comfortable until your people send another ship to fetch you."

The terrestrials looked at one another. Dfar-LII looked at Jrann-Pttt.

Professor Bernardi coughed. "That was the only spaceship we had," he admitted. "The first experimental model, you know." We don't expect to stay on this awful planet forever. After all, as Louisa says, the government will have to forgive us. Public opinion and all that.

"Oh," the saurian said. "Then we shall have the pleasure of your company until they build another?"

There was silence. "We have the only plans," the professor said, gripping his briefcase more tightly. "I am the inventor of the ship, so naturally I would have them." If we brought back some specimens of Venusian life—of intelligent Venusian life—to prove we'd been here....

"Matter of fact, old fellow," Mortland said, "we took all the plans with us so they couldn't build another ship and follow—"

"Mortland!" the professor exclaimed.

"But they're telepaths," Miss Anspacher said. "They must know already."

Everyone turned to look at the saurians.

"I have ... certain information," Jrann-Pttt admitted, "but I cannot understand it. You are in trouble with your rulers

because they would not give you the funds, claiming space travel was impossible?"

"That's right," Bernardi said. Not really specimens, you understand. Guests.

"And you went ahead and appropriated the funds and materials from your government, since you were in a trusted position where you could do so?"

Bernardi nodded.

"Of course the question is now academic, for the ship is gone, but since you proved the possibility of space travel by coming here, wouldn't your government then dismiss the charges against you?"

"That's exactly what I keep telling him!" Mrs. Bernardi exclaimed.

But her husband shook his head. "The law is inflexible. We have broken it and must be punished, even if by breaking it we proved its fundamental error." Why let him know our plans?

Why, Jrann-Pttt, that sounds just like our own government, doesn't it?

Yes, it does. We should be able to establish a very satisfactory mode of living with these strangers.

"We'd hoped that after a year or so the whole thing would die down," Mortland explained frankly, "and we'd go back as heroes."

"Do you know the way to your home, Jrann-Pttt?" the professor asked anxiously.

"Since we were able to catch a glimpse of the sun, I think I can figure out roughly where we are. All we must do is walk some two hundred kilometers in that direction—" he waved an arm to indicate the way—"and we should be at the capital."

"Will your people accept us as refugees?" Miss Anspacher demanded bluntly, "or will we be captives?" Which is what I'll bet the good professor is planning for you, if only he can figure some way to get you and, of course, ourselves back.

"We should be proud to accept you as citizens and to receive the benefits of your splendid technology. Our laboratories will be placed at your disposal."

"Well, that's better than we hoped for," the professor said, brightening. "We had expected to have to carve our own laboratories out of the wilderness. Now we shall be able to carry on our researches in comfort." No need to trouble the natives; we'll be able to raise the ship ourselves. Or build a new one. And I'll see to it personally that they have special quarters in the zoo with a considerable amount of privacy.

"If I were you, I wouldn't trust him too far," the captain warned. "He's a foreigner."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Captain!" Miss Anspacher said. "I, for one, trust Jrann-Pttt implicitly. Did you say this direction, Jrann-Pttt?" She stepped forward briskly. There was a loud splash and water closed over her head.

Captain Greenfield rushed forward to haul her out. "Well," she said, daintily coughing up mud, "I was wet to begin with, anyway."

"You're a brave little woman, Miss Anspacher," the captain told her admiringly.

"This sort of thing may present a problem," Professor Bernardi commented. "I hope that was only a pot-hole, that the water is not going to be consistently too deep for wading."

"There might be quicksand, too," Mrs. Bernardi said somberly. "In quicksand, one drowns slowly."

Dfar-LII gave a start. Surely you don't intend to lead them back to base?

Precisely. The swamp is unfit for settlement.

But to return voluntarily to captivity?

Who mentioned anything about captivity? Assisted by our new friends, we have an excellent chance of taking over the ship and supplies by a surprise attack.

But why should these aliens assist us?

Jrann-Pttt smiled. Oh, I think they will. Yes, I have every confidence in Plan C.

"I suggest," the professor said, ignoring his wife's pessimism, "that each one of us pull a branch from a tree. We can test the ground before we step on it, to make sure that there is solid footing underneath."

"Good idea," the captain approved. He reached out the arm that was not occupied with Miss Anspacher and tugged at a tree limb.

And then he and the lady physicist were both floundering in the ooze.

"Well, really, Captain Greenfield!" she cried, refusing his aid in extricating herself. "I always thought you were at least a gentleman in spite of your illiteracy!"

"Wha—what happened?" he asked as he struggled out of the mud. "Something pushed me; I swear it."

Jrann-Pttt mentalized. "It seems the tree did not like your trying to remove a branch."

"The tree!" Greenfield's pale blue eyes bulged. "You're joking!"

"Not at all. As a matter of fact, I myself have been wondering why there were so many thought-streams and yet so few animals around here. It never occurred to me that the vegetation could be sentient and have such strong emotive defenses. In all my experience as a botanist, I—"

"I thought you were a zoologist," Bernardi interrupted.

"My people do not believe in excessive specialization," the saurian replied.

"Trees that think?" Mortland inquired incredulously.

"They're not very bright," Jrann-Pttt explained, "but they don't like having their limbs pulled off. I don't suppose you would, either, for that matter."

"I propose," Miss Anspacher said, shaking out her wet hair, "that we break up the camp stools and use the sticks instead of branches to help us along."

"Good idea," the captain said, trying to get back into her good graces. "I always knew women could put their brains to use if they tried."

She glared at him.

"I thought we'd use the furniture to make a fire later," Mortland complained. "For tea, you know."

"The ground's much too wet," Professor Bernardi replied.

"And besides," Miss Anspacher added, "I lost the teapot in that pot-hole."

"But you managed to save the Proceedings of the Physical Society," Mortland snarled. "Serve you right if I eat it. And I warn you, if hard-pressed, I shall."

"How will we cook our food, though?" Mrs. Bernardi demanded apprehensively. "It's a lucky thing, Mr. Pitt, that we have you with us to tell us which of the berries and things are edible, so at least we shan't starve."

The visible portion of Jrann-Pttt's well-knit form turned deeper green. "But I regret to say I don't know, Mrs. Bernardi. Those 'native' foods I served you were all synthetics from our personal stores. I never tasted natural foods before I met you."

"And if the trees don't like our taking their branches," Miss Anspacher put in, "I don't suppose the bushes would like our taking their berries. Louisa, don't do that!"

But Mrs. Bernardi, with her usual disregard for orders, had fainted into the mud. Pulling her out and reviving her caused so much confusion, it wasn't until then that they discovered Algol had disappeared.

The party had been trudging through mud and water and struggling with pale, malevolent vines and bushes and low-hanging branches for close to six Earth hours. All of them were tired and hungry, now that their meager supply of biscuits and chocolate was gone.

"Remember, Carl," Mrs. Bernardi told her husband, "I forgive you. And I know I'm being foolishly sentimental, but if you could manage to take my body back to Earth—"

"Don't be so pessimistic." Professor Bernardi absent-mindedly leaned against a tree, then recoiled as he remembered it might resent being treated like an inanimate object. "In any case, we'll most likely all die at the same time."

"I never did want to go to Venus, really," Mrs. Bernardi sniffled. "I only came, like Algol did, because I didn't have any choice. If you left me behind, I'd have had to bear the brunt of.... Where is Algol?" She stared at Jrann-Pttt. "You were carrying him. What have you done with him?"

The lizard-man looked at her in consternation. "He jumped out of my arms when you fainted and I turned back to help. I was certain one of the others had him."

"He's dead!" she wailed. "You let him fall into the water and drown—an innocent kitty that never hurt anybody, except in fun."

"Come, come, Louisa." Her husband took her arm. "He was only a cat. I'm sure Jrann-Pttt didn't mean for him to drown. He was just so upset by your fainting that he didn't think...."

"Not Jrann-Pttt's fault, of course," Miss Anspacher said.

"After all, we can't expect them to love animals as we do. But Algol was a very good sort of cat...."

"Keep quiet, all of you!" Jrann-Pttt shouted. "I have never known any species to use any method of communication so much in order to communicate so little. Don't you understand? I would not have assumed the cat was with one of you, if I had not subconsciously sensed his thought-stream all along. He must be nearby."

Everyone was still, while Jrann-Pttt probed the dense underbrush that blocked their view on both sides. "Over here," he announced, and led the way through the thick screen of interlaced bushes and vines on the left.

About ten meters farther on, the ground sloped up sharply to form a ridge rising a meter and a half above the rest of the terrain. The water had not reached its blunted top, and on this fairly level strip of ground, perhaps three meters wide, Algol had been paralleling their path in dry-pawed comfort.

"Scientists!" Louisa Bernardi almost spat. "Professors! We could have been walking on that, too. But did anybody think to look for dry ground? No! It was wet in one place, so it would be wet in another. Oh, Algol—" she reached over to embrace the cat—"you're smarter than any so-called intelligent life-forms."

He indignantly straightened a whisker she had crumpled.

"Look," Mortland exclaimed in delight as they attained the top of the ridge, "here are some dryish twigs! Don't

suppose the trees want them, since they've let them fall. If I can get a fire going, we could boil some swamp water and make tea. Nasty thought, but it's better than no tea at all. And how long can one go on living without tea?"

"We'll need some food before long, too," Professor Bernardi observed, putting his briefcase down on a fallen log. "The usual procedure, I believe, would be for us to draw straws to see which gets eaten—although there isn't any hurry."

"I'm glad then that we'll be able to have a fire," Mortland said, busily collecting twigs. "I should hate to have to eat you raw, Carl."

Mr. Pitt and his little friend are delightful creatures, Mrs. Bernardi thought. So intelligent and so well behaved. But eating them wouldn't really be cannibalism. They aren't people.

That premise works both ways, dear lady, Jrann-Pttt ideated. And I must say your species will prove far easier to peel for the cooking pot.

"Monster! What are you doing?" Mortland dropped his twigs and pulled the mosquito-bat away from a bush. "Don't eat those berries, you silly ass; the bush won't like it!" The mosquito-bat piped wrathfully.

Jrann-Pttt probed with intentness. "You know, I rather think the bush wants its berries to be eaten. Something to do with—er—propagating itself. Of course it has a false impression as to what is going to be done with the berries, but the important fact is that it won't put up any resistance."

"All right, old fellow." Mortland released the mosquito-bat, which promptly flew back to the bush. "I'm not the custodian of your morals."

"I wonder whether we could eat those berries, too," Professor Bernardi remarked pensively.

"Carl!" Mrs. Bernardi's tear-stained face flushed pink. "Why—why, that's almost indecent!"

"We eat beans, don't we?" Mortland pointed out. "They're seeds."

"We also eat meat," Miss Anspacher added.

There was silence. "I imagine," Mrs. Bernardi murmured, "it's because we never get to meet the meat socially." She avoided the saurians' eyes.

"We'd better see how Monster makes out, though," Miss Anspacher observed, replenishing her lipstick, "before we try the berries ourselves. The fact that the bush is anxious to dispose of them doesn't mean they can't be poisonous."

"Why should Monster sacrifice himself for us?" Mortland retorted hotly, overlooking the fact that Monster's purpose in eating the berries was almost certainly not an altruistic one. "If we can risk his life, we can risk our own." He crammed a handful of berries into his mouth defiantly. "I say, they're good!"

Algol sniffed the bush with disgust, then turned away.

"See?" said Miss Anspacher. "They're undoubtedly poisonous. When he's really hungry, he isn't so fussy." She combed her hair.

"But is he really hungry?" Bernardi asked suspiciously. "Come here, Algol. Nice kitty." He bent down and sniffed the cat's breath. The cat sniffed him interestedly. Their whiskers touched. "I thought so. Fish!"

"You mean," Mrs. Bernardi shrieked, "that while we were struggling through that water, alternately starving and drowning by centimeters, that wretched cat has not only been walking along here dry as toast, but gorging himself on fish?"

"Now, now, Mrs. Bernardi," Jrann-Pttt said. "Being a dumb animal, he wouldn't think of informing you about

matters of which he'd assume that you, as the superior beings, would be fully cognizant."

"You might have told us there were fish on this planet, Mr. Pitt."

"Dear lady, there is something I feel I should tell you. I am not—"

"They're here on the other side of the ridge," Greenfield called, bending over and peering through the foliage. "The fish, I mean."

"The pools look shallow," Bernardi said, also bending over. "The fish should be easy enough to catch. Might even be able to get them in our hands." He reached out to demonstrate, proving the error of both his theses, for the fish slipped right through his fingers and, as he grabbed for them, he lost his balance, toppled over the side of the ridge into the mud and water below and began to disappear, showing beyond a doubt that the pools were deeper than he had thought.

"Carl, what are you doing?" Mrs. Bernardi peered into the murky depths where her husband was threshing about. "Why don't you come out of that filthy mud?"

His voice, though muffled, was still acid. "It isn't mud, my dear. It's quicksand!"

"Rope!" the captain exclaimed, grabbing a coil.

"Hold on, chaps!" cried a squeaky voice. "I'm coming to the rescue!" A stout twelve-foot vine plunged out of the shadows and wrapped one end of itself around a tree—disregarding the latter's violent objections—and the other end around Professor Bernardi's thorax, which was just disappearing into the mud. "Now if one or two of you would haul away, we'll soon have him out all shipshape and proper. Heave ho! Don't be afraid of hurting me; my strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure."

"It's that vine!" Dfar-LII exclaimed. "So that's what has been following us all along!"

"I can accept the idea of a vegetable thinking," Professor Bernardi gasped as he was pulled out of the quicksand, "although with the utmost reluctance." He shook himself like a dog. "But how can it be mobile?"

"You chaps can move around," the vine explained, "so I said to myself: 'Dammit, I'll have a shot at doing that, too.' Hard going at first, when you're using suckers, but I persevered and I made it. Look, I can talk, too. Never heard of a vine doing that before, did you? Fact is, I hadn't thought of it before, but then I never had anyone to communicate with. All those other vines are so stupid; you have absolutely no idea! Hope you don't mind my picking up your language, but it was the only one around—"

"We are honored," Professor Bernardi declared. "And I am deeply grateful to you, too, sir or madam, for saving my life."

"Think nothing of it," the vine said, arranging its leaves, which were of a pleasing celadon rather than the whitish-green favored by the rest of the local vegetation. "Now that I can move, I'll probably be doing heroic things like that all the time. Are you all going to the city? May I go with you? I've heard lots about the city," it went on, taking consent for granted, "but I never thought I'd get to see it. Everybody in the swamp is such an old stick-in-the-mud. I thought I was trapped, too, forced to spend the rest of my life in a provincial environment. Is it true that the streets are filled with chlorophyll? Do you think I can get a job in a botanical garden or something? Perhaps I can give little talks on horticulture to visitors?"

The mosquito-bat looked out of the tea kettle austerely. "Monster!" it piped shrilly.

"The very idea!" the vine snapped back indignantly. "Oh, well," it said, calming down, "you probably don't know any better. It's up to me as the intelligent life-form to forgive you, and I shall."

Jrann-Pttt and Dfar-LII looked at each other in consternation. Do you think there really are cities on this planet, sir? Can there be indigenous intelligent life? If so, it may have already got in touch with the commandant.

Impossible, Jrann-Pttt replied. The vine probably just heard us talking about a city. After all, it picked up the

language that way; very likely it absorbed some terrestrial concepts along with it. If there are any real settlements at all, they must be quite primitive—nothing more than villages. No, it's we who will build the cities on Venus. Combining our technology with the terrestrials', we could develop a pretty little civilization here—after we've disposed of the commandant, so he can't report our disappearance. We don't want any publicity. So much better to keep our little society exclusive.

"Wonder what time it is," the captain remarked as he rose and stretched in the dim yellow light of the long Venusian day. "Must have slept for hours. My watch seems to have stopped."

"Mine, too." Mortland unstrapped his from his wrist and shook it futilely. "Waterproof, hah! If we ever get back to Earth, I shall make the manufacturer eat his guarantee."

"Oh, well, what does time matter to us now?" Professor Bernardi pointed out as he rose from his leafy couch with a loud creak. All of them—even the saurians—had aches and pains in every joint and muscle as a result of the unaccustomed exercise and the damp climate. "We are out of its reach. It has no present meaning for us."

This depressed them all. Only the vine seemed in good health and spirits. "I notice you're all wearing clothes except for the short four-legged gentleman with the home-grown fur coat," it chattered happily. "Do you think I'll be socially acceptable without them? I wouldn't want to make a bad impression at the very start—or would leaves do?"

Everybody looked at Jrann-Pttt. "We are not a narrow-minded species," he said hastily. "I'm sure your leaves will be more than adequate."

After a breakfast of fish and berries stewed in tea—which the vine declined with thanks—the various members of the party gathered up their belongings and resumed their journey. Encrusted with dried purple mud and grime, their clothes deliberately torn by anti-social shrubbery, their chins—of the males, that is—disfigured by hirsute growths, the terrestrials made a sorry spectacle. It was hot, boiling hot, and more humid than ever.

"Well," said Miss Anspacher, letting the Swahili marching song with which she had been attempting to encourage the company peter out, "I do hope we'll reach your city soon, Jrann-Pttt. I must say I could use a hot bath." She added hastily, "Hot baths are a peculiar cultural trait of ours."

"I could use one myself," Jrann-Pttt said. He brushed his scales fastidiously.

"I'm looking forward so to meeting your relatives," she said, grabbing his left arm determinedly. "I'm not violating a taboo or anything, am I?" It isn't really slimy; it just feels that way.

"Not one of my people's. But I'm afraid you are violating a terrestrial taboo, judging from the thoughts I pick up from your captain's mind."

"Oh, him—he's a stupid fool!"

"Not at all. Rough, perhaps. Untutored, yes. But with a good deal of native intelligence, although fearfully primitive."

"Perhaps I was too harsh," Miss Anspacher observed thoughtfully. The captain ... is good-looking in a brutal sort of way, although not nearly as handsome or even as spiritual in appearance as Jrann-Pttt. And sometimes I almost think he—she blushed to herself—shows a certain partiality for my company.

She did not, however, let go of the saurian's arm when the captain bustled up, prepared to put a stop to this, but tactfully, if possible, for he had begun to realize that his rude ways did not endear him to her.

"Ah—we're making very good progress, aren't we, Pitt?" he interrupted, trying to insinuate himself between the two.

"Excellent."

"How soon do you think we'll be at your city at this rate?"

Jrann-Pttt shrugged. "Since I have no way of telling what our rate is or how far we have gone, how can I tell? As a matter of fact, you might as well learn now as later—I am not a Venusian. There is no intelligent life native to Venus."

"Oh, really!" the vine interposed indignantly. "Saying a thing like that right in front of me! What would you call me, then, pray tell?"

Jrann-Pttt kept his actual thoughts to himself. "A mutation," he said. "Probably you are the first intelligent life-form to appear upon this planet. Scholarly volumes will be written about you."

"Oh?" The vine seemed to be appeased. "I accept your apology. Perhaps I'll learn to write and do the books myself, because I'm the only one who can understand the real me."

"But how can you show us the way to your city if you're not native to Venus?" Bernardi demanded, whirling fretfully upon the saurian. "What is this, anyway? Each time you come up with a different story!"

"See?" said the captain. "Didn't I tell you he was up to no good?"

"I should like to lead you to our base," Jrann-Pttt replied with quiet dignity. "I am telling you the truth now since I feel I should have your consent before proceeding farther."

??????? Dfar-LII projected.

"I hesitated before, because I wasn't sure I could trust you. You see, the spaceship in which we came to this planet is a prison ship, with a crew consisting of malefactors—thieves, murderers, defrauders—dispatched to the remote fastnesses of the Galaxy to fetch back zoological specimens. Our zoo, I must say, is the finest and most interesting in the Universe."

"Monster!" the mosquito-bat squeaked.

"Shhh," Mortland admonished. "Don't interrupt."

"I was in command of our ill-fated expedition...."

Oh, Dfar-LII projected. For a moment there, sir, you had me worried.

"When we reached Venus, I was, I must admit, careless. I gave the crew a chance to mutiny and they did. Slew most of the officers. Dfar-LII and I were lucky to escape with our lives."

"But you might have told us!" Mrs. Bernardi's voice held reproach.

"Until we knew what kind of beings you were, we couldn't let you know how helpless and unprotected we were."

The women seemed moved, but not the men.

"Leading us on a wild goose chase, were you?" the captain challenged.

Jrann-Pttt drew a deep breath. "It was my hope that all of you would consent to help us get our ship back from these criminals. Then we could fly to my planet—which is the fifth of the star you know as Alpha Centauri—where, I assure you, you would be hospitably received."

We aren't really going back home, Jrann-Pttt, are we? I'd sooner stay here in the swamp than go back to that jail.

Have confidence in me, r-LII. As soon as we have disposed of the commandant and his officers, I can put our ship out of commission. The terrestrials won't be able to tell what's wrong. They know nothing about space travel. The fact that they got their crude vessel to operate was probably sheer luck.

But the younger was not to be diverted. Will we kill them after we've disposed of our officers? I should hate to.

Certainly not. We shall need servants and I don't trust the prisoners in the ship—all criminals of the lowest type! Aloud, he said to the bewildered terrestrials, "If you don't want to help us, I shall understand. No sense your interfering in another species' quarrels, particularly as we must seem like monsters to you."

"Monster!" the mosquito-bat agreed. "Monster, monster, monster!" No one tried to stop him. Jrann-Pttt sensed that somehow he had lost a good deal of his grip on the terrestrials. Finesse, he thought angrily, was wasted on these barbaric life-forms.

Bernardi sighed. "I suppose we'll have to help you." No reason why his ship shouldn't stop off at Earth before it goes to Alpha Centauri. No reason why it should even go to Alpha Centauri at all, in fact.

"If you ask me," the captain said, "he's one of the criminals himself."

"But nobody asked you," Miss Anspacher retorted, the more acidly because she had been wondering the same thing. "Shall we resume our journey?"

"Hold on," the vine said. "I don't want to intrude or anything, but it hasn't been made quite clear to me whether or not I'm included in the invitation to this Alpha Centauri place, and I wouldn't want to keep going only on the off-chance that you might ask me. I really think you should, because you led me astray with your fair promises of glittering cities."

"The cities of our planet do not glitter," Jrann-Pttt replied, wishing it would wither instantly, "but certainly you are invited. Glad to have you."

"Oh, that's awfully decent of you," the vine said emotionally. "I shan't forget it, I promise you."

They plodded onward, the vine chattering so incessantly that a faint gurgling which accompanied them went unnoticed. The gurgling grew louder and louder as they pushed on. Finally, "I keep hearing water," Mortland remarked. "We must be approaching a river of some kind."

A few minutes later, bursting through a screen of underbrush, they found themselves confronted by a river whose bubbling violet-blue waters extended for at least four kilometers from shadowy bank to bank, with the ridge tapering to a point almost in its exact center.

Apparently, while they had been trekking along the elevation, the surrounding terrain, concealed from them by the dense and evil-minded vegetation, had imperceptibly taken off, leaving the ridge to become a peninsula that jutted out into the river. They seemed to be stranded. All they could do was retrace their steps and, since they had no idea how far back the split became part of the mainland again, the return journey might last almost as long as it had taken them to get there.

"I know we're heading in the right direction," Jrann-Pttt defended himself. "I wasn't aware of the river because we must have come by an overland route." Although he was telling the truth, at least insofar as he knew it himself, no one, not even Dfar-LII, believed him.

"But let's rest a bit before we turn back," Mortland proposed, flopping to the ground. "I'm utterly used up."

"Maybe we don't need to go back," the vine said. "Not all the way, anyhow." Everyone stared. It waved its leaves brightly at them. "I notice the captain thoughtfully brought along lots of rope and there were scads of fallen logs just a bit back. Couldn't you just lash the logs together with the rope and make a—a thing on which we could float the rest of the way? On the water, you know."

The others continued to look at it open-mouthed.

"Just a little idea I had," it said modestly. "May not amount to much, but then you can't tell until you've tried, can you?"

"It—he—means a raft, I think," Mrs. Bernardi said.

Jrann-Pttt probed the raft concept in her mind, for he found the vegetable's mental processes curiously obscure. "What an excellent idea!" he exclaimed.

"It does not seem infeasible," Professor Bernardi admitted tightly. By now, he was suspicious of everyone and everything. If I had never broached the idea of space travel to those peasants, he thought, I would be on Earth in the dubious comfort of my own home. That's what comes of trying to help humanity.

"Well," observed the captain as the heavy raft hit the water with a tremendous splash, "she seems to be riverworthy." He rubbed his hands in anticipation, much of his surliness gone, now that he was about to deal with something he understood. "Since she is, in a manner of speaking, a ship, I suppose I assume command again?" He waited for objections, glancing involuntarily in Jrann-Pttt's direction. There were none. "Right," he said, repressing any outward symptoms of relief.

He efficiently deployed the personnel to the positions on the raft where he felt they might be least useless, the gear being piled in the middle and surmounted by Algol, who naturally assumed possession of the softest and safest place by the divine right of cats.

The captain does have a commanding presence, Miss Anspacher thought, and a sort of uncouth grace. Moreover, he cannot read my mind—in fact, he often cannot even understand me when I speak.

"All right!" he bellowed. "Cast off!"

The vine unfastened the rope that it had insouciantly attached to a tree trunk, remarking to the others, "Don't let the trees intimidate you. Actually their bark is worse than their bite." Now it dropped lithely on board the raft, looking for a comfortable resting place.

"Please don't twine around me," Miss Anspacher said coldly. "If you insist upon coming with us, you will have to choose an inanimate object to cling to."

"All right, all right," it tried to soothe her. "No need to get yourself all worked up over such a mere triviality, is there? I'll just coil myself tidily around one of those spare logs. I must say you're warmer, though."

Yes, she is, isn't she? thought the captain, and squeezed her hand.

The raft drifted down the river. Since the current was flowing in the desired direction, there did not appear to be any need to use the poles, and everyone sat or reclined as comfortably as possible in the suffocating heat. The yellow haze had become so thick that they seemed to be at the bottom of a custard cup.

"I do hope we're heading the right way," Professor Bernardi said, although who knows what is right and what is wrong any more?

"Perhaps we aren't," Mrs. Bernardi mused, stroking Algol, who had crawled into her lap. "Perhaps we will go drifting along endlessly. Every sixteen days, it will get dark and every sixteen days it will get light, and meanwhile we will continue floating along, never going anywhere, never getting anywhere, never seeing anything but haze and raft and river and each other." Algol wheezed in his sleep.

"Nonsense!" Jrann-Pttt said rudely. "I have a compass. I know the direction perfectly well."

"And yet you let us think we were wandering about blindly." Miss Anspacher gave him a contemptuous look. The captain pressed her hand.

"Since you seem to breathe the same air and eat much the same food that we do, Mr. Pitt," Mrs. Bernardi changed her tack, "I suppose we'll be physically comfortable on your planet for the rest of our lives. Our children will be born there and our children's children, and eventually they'll forget all about Earth and think it was only a legend."

"But you did expect to settle permanently on Venus, didn't you?" the vine asked, bewilderedly. "Or for a long visit, anyway. So I don't really see that it makes much difference if you go to Jrann-Pttt's Alpha Centauri place."

So much nicer to be living with friends, I should think."

"But Alpha Centauri is so very far away," Mrs. Bernardi sighed. "There wouldn't be much chance of our ever getting back."

"Look!" Mortland exclaimed. "The river's branching. Which fork do we take?"

Jrann-Pttt, who had been dabbling his arms idly in the translucent violet-blue water, withdrew them hastily as nine green eyes, obviously belonging to the same individual, rose to the surface and regarded him with more than casual interest. He consulted his compass. "Left."

"Contrarily!" the mosquito-bat suddenly squeaked, pointing a small rod at his companions. "Rightward."

There was a stunned silence.

"Monster!" Mortland cried in reproach. "You can talk! How could you deceive us like that?"

"Can talk," the creature retorted. "Me not intelligent life-form, ha! Who talks last talks best. Have not linguistic facility of inferior life-forms, but can communicate rudely in your language."

"Remember," Mortland cautioned, "there are ladies present."

"Have been lying low and laughing to self—ha, ha!—at witlessness of lowerly life-forms."

"But why?" Mrs. Bernardi demanded distractedly. "Haven't we been kind to you?"

"You be likewise well treated in our zoo," it assured her. "All of you. Our zoo finest in Galaxy. And clean, too."

"Now really, sir, I must protest—" Professor Bernardi began, trying to extricate a blaster unobtrusively from the pile of gear in which the too-confident terrestrials had cached their weapons.

Monster gestured with his rod. "This is lethal weapon. Do not try hindrancing me. Hate damage fine specimens. Captain, go rightward."

"Oh, is that so!" Greenfield retorted hotly. "Let me tell you, you—you insect!"

"George!" Miss Anspacher clutched his arm. "Do what it says. For my sake, George!"

"Oh, all right," he muttered. "Just for you, then. Told you not to trust any of 'em," he went on, reluctantly poling the raft in the ordered direction. "Foreigners!"

"Fine zoo," the mosquito-bat insisted. "Very clean. Run with utmost efficientness. Strict visiting hours."

"And there goes Plan D," the vine said lightly. There was a hint of laughter in its voice. Jrann-Pttt stared at it in consternation. "Are you also from the Alpha Centauri system, sir?" It turned its attention to the mosquito-bat. "Naturally I'm curious to know where I'm going," it explained, "since I seem definitely to be included in your gracious invitation."

"Alpha Centauri, hah!" the mosquito-bat snorted. "I from what Earthlets laughingly term Sirius. Alpha Centauri merely little star."

"Now see here!" Jrann-Pttt sprang to his feet. Criminal he might be, but he was not going to sit there and have his sun insulted!

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Miss Anspacher cried. "No use getting yourself killed, Jrann-Pttt!"

"Correctly," Monster approved. "Elementary intelligence displayed. Why damage fine specimens?"

From one prison into another, the saurian mentalized bitterly.

Yes, returned Dfar-LII, and it's all your fault. The junior lizard burst into tears. I wish I had let Merglyt-Ruuu do what he wanted. I would have been better off.

"Sirius," the vine repeated. "That's even farther away than Alpha Centauri, isn't it? I never thought I would get that far away from the swamp! This really will be an adventure!"

"How do you know—" Professor Bernardi began.

"Frankly," it went on, "I don't see why you chaps are so put out by the whole thing. What's the difference between Alpha Centauri and Sirius anyway? Matter of a few light-years, but otherwise a star's a star for all that."

"To Jrann-Pttt, we wouldn't have been specimens," Mrs. Bernardi said, belatedly recognizing the advantages of Alpha Centauri.

"No, not specimens," the vine told her easily. "I don't suppose you know he had no intention of taking you back to his system. He wanted you to help him kill the officers of his ship so they couldn't look for him and the other escaped prisoner or report back to his planet. Then he was going to put the ship out of commission and found his own colony here with you as his slaves. I'd just as soon be a specimen as a slave. Sooner. Better to reign in a zoo than serve in a swamp!"

"Just how do you know all this?" Miss Anspacher demanded.

"It's obvious enough," Bernardi said gloomily. "Another telepath." How can we compete or even cope with creatures like these? What a fool I was to think I could outwit them.

"Telepathy just tricksomeness," the mosquito-bat put in jealously. "I have no telepathy, yet superior to all."

"But why should Mr. Pitt want to kill his officers?" Mrs. Bernardi asked querulously. "He's the commandant, isn't he? Or is he a professor? I never got that straight."

"He was one of the criminals on the ship," the vine told her. "What you might call a confidence man. This is about the only system in the Galaxy where he isn't wanted. He did tell you the truth, though, when he said they were sent on an expedition to collect zoological specimens. Dangerous work," it sighed, "and so his people use criminals for it. They were sent out in small detachments. Our friend here killed his guard in a fight over a female prisoner, which was why—"

"But what happened to the female prisoner?" Miss Anspacher's eye caught Dfar-LII's. "Oh, no!" she gasped.

"Why not?" Dfar-LII demanded. "I'm as much of a female as you are. Maybe even more."

The captain leaned close to Miss Anspacher. "No one can be more feminine than you are, Dolores," he whispered.

"But he—she's so young!" Mrs. Bernardi wailed.

The vine made an amused sound. "Don't you have juvenile delinquents on Earth?"

"Oh, what does all that matter now?" Jrann-Pttt said sullenly. "We're all going to a Sirian zoo, anyway."

"Correctly," approved the monster-bat. "Finest zoo. Clean. Commodious cages. Reasonable visiting hours. Very nice."

Mrs. Bernardi began to cry.

"Now," the vine comforted her, "a zoo's not so bad. After all, most of us spend our lives in cages of one kind or another, and without the basic security a zoo affords—"

"But we don't know we're in cages," Mrs. Bernardi sobbed. "That's the important thing."

Professor Bernardi looked at the vine. "But why are you—" he began, then halted. "Perhaps I don't want an answer," he said. There was no hope at all left in him, now that there was no doubt.

"You are wise," the vine agreed quietly. Algol arose from Mr. Bernardi's lap and rubbed against its thick pale green stem. He knew. The mosquito-bat looked at both of them restlessly.

The yellow haze had deepened to old gold. Now it was beginning to turn brown.

"It's twilight," Miss Anspacher observed. "Soon it will be dark."

"Perhaps we'll sail right past his ship in the night," Mortland suggested hopefully.

The mosquito-bat gave a snort. "Ship has lights. All modern conveniences."

Suddenly the air seemed to have grown chilly—colder than it had any right to be on that torrid planet. All around them, it was dark and very quiet.

"I think I do see lights," Mortland said.

"Must be ship," Monster replied. And somehow the rest of them could sense the uneasiness in the thin, piping, alien voice. "Must be!"

"Your ship's a very large one then," Bernardi commented as they rounded a bend and a whole colony of varicolored pastel lights sprang up ahead of them.

"Not my ship!" the mosquito-bat exclaimed in a voice pierced with anguish. "Not my ship!"

Before them rose the fantastic, twisting, convoluting, turning spires of a tall, marvelous, glittering city.

"You will find that the streets actually are filled with chlorophyll," the vine said. "And I know you'll be happy here, all of you. You see, we can't have you going back to your planets now. No matter how good your intentions were, you'd destroy us. You do see that, don't you?"

"You may be right," Bernardi agreed dispiritedly, "although that doesn't cheer us any. But what will you do with us?"

"You'll be provided with living quarters comparable to those on your own planets," the vine told him, "and you'll give lectures just as if you were in a university—only you'll be much more secure. I assure you—" its voice was very gentle now—"you'll hardly know you're in a zoo."

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CONTAGION

By KATHERINE MacLEAN

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Minos was such a lovely planet. Not a thing
seemed wrong with it. Excepting the food,
perhaps. And a disease that wasn't really.

It was like an Earth forest in the fall, but it was not fall. The
forest leaves were green and copper and purple and fiery red, and a
wind sent patches of bright greenish sunlight dancing among the leaf
shadows.

The hunt party of the _Explorer_ filed along the narrow trail, guns
ready, walking carefully, listening to the distant, half familiar cries
of strange birds.

A faint crackle of static in their earphones indicated that a gun had been fired.

"Got anything?" asked June Walton. The helmet intercom carried her voice to the ears of the others without breaking the stillness of the forest.

"Took a shot at something," explained George Barton's cheerful voice in her earphones. She rounded a bend of the trail and came upon Barton standing peering up into the trees, his gun still raised. "It looked like a duck."

"This isn't Central Park," said Hal Barton, his brother, coming into sight. His green spacesuit struck an incongruous note against the bronze and red forest. "They won't all look like ducks," he said soberly.

"Maybe some will look like dragons. Don't get eaten by a dragon, June," came Max's voice quietly into her earphones. "Not while I still love you." He came out of the trees carrying the blood sample kit, and touched her glove with his, the grin on his ugly beloved face barely visible in the mingled light and shade. A patch of sunlight struck a greenish glint from his fishbowl helmet.

* * * * *

They walked on. A quarter of a mile back, the space ship Explorer towered over the forest like a tapering skyscraper, and the people of the ship looked out of the viewplates at fresh winds and sunlight and clouds, and they longed to be outside.

But the likeness to Earth was danger, and the cool wind might be death, for if the animals were like Earth animals, their diseases might be like Earth diseases, alike enough to be contagious, different enough to be impossible to treat. There was warning enough in the past. Colonies had vanished, and traveled spaceways drifted with the corpses of ships which had touched on some plague planet.

The people of the ship waited while their doctors, in airtight spacesuits, hunted animals to test them for contagion.

The four medicos, for June Walton was also a doctor, filed through the alien homelike forest, walking softly, watching for motion among the copper and purple shadows.

They saw it suddenly, a lighter moving copper patch among the darker browns. Reflex action swung June's gun into line, and behind her someone's gun went off with a faint crackle of static, and made a hole in the leaves beside the specimen. Then for a while no one moved.

This one looked like a man, a magnificently muscled, leanly graceful, humanlike animal. Even in its callused bare feet, it was a head taller than any of them. Red-haired, hawk-faced and darkly tanned, it stood breathing heavily, looking at them without expression. At its side hung a sheath knife, and a crossbow was slung across one wide shoulder.

They lowered their guns.

"It needs a shave," Max said reasonably in their earphones, and he

reached up to his helmet and flipped the switch that let his voice be heard. "Something we could do for you, Mac?"

The friendly drawl was the first voice that had broken the forest sounds. June smiled suddenly. He was right. The strict logic of evolution did not demand beards; therefore a non-human would not be wearing a three day growth of red stubble.

Still panting, the tall figure licked dry lips and spoke. "Welcome to Minos. The Mayor sends greetings from Alexandria."

"English?" gasped June.

"We were afraid you would take off again before I could bring word to you.... It's three hundred miles.... We saw your scout plane pass twice, but we couldn't attract its attention."

* * * * *

June looked in stunned silence at the stranger leaning against the tree. Thirty-six light years--thirty-six times six trillion miles of monotonous space travel--to be told that the planet was already settled! "We didn't know there was a colony here," she said. "It is not on the map."

"We were afraid of that," the tall bronze man answered soberly. "We have been here three generations and yet no traders have come."

Max shifted the kit strap on his shoulder and offered a hand. "My name is Max Stark, M.D. This is June Walton, M.D., Hal Barton, M.D., and George Barton, Hal's brother, also M.D."

"Patrick Mead is the name," smiled the man, shaking hands casually. "Just a hunter and bridge carpenter myself. Never met any medicos before."

The grip was effortless but even through her airproofed glove June could feel that the fingers that touched hers were as hard as padded steel.

"What--what is the population of Minos?" she asked.

He looked down at her curiously for a moment before answering. "Only one hundred and fifty." He smiled. "Don't worry, this isn't a city planet yet. There's room for a few more people." He shook hands with the Bartons quickly. "That is--you are people, aren't you?" he asked startlingly.

"Why not?" said Max with a poise that June admired.

"Well, you are all so--so--" Patrick Mead's eyes roamed across the faces of the group. "So varied."

They could find no meaning in that, and stood puzzled.

"I mean," Patrick Mead said into the silence, "all these--interesting different hair colors and face shapes and so forth--" He made a vague wave with one hand as if he had run out of words or was anxious not to insult them.

"Joke?" Max asked, bewildered.

June laid a hand on his arm. "No harm meant," she said to him over the intercom. "We're just as much of a shock to him as he is to us."

She addressed a question to the tall colonist on outside sound. "What should a person look like, Mr. Mead?"

He indicated her with a smile. "Like you."

June stepped closer and stood looking up at him, considering her own description. She was tall and tanned, like him; had a few freckles, like him; and wavy red hair, like his. She ignored the brightly humorous blue eyes.

"In other words," she said, "everyone on the planet looks like you and me?"

Patrick Mead took another look at their four faces and began to grin. "Like me, I guess. But I hadn't thought of it before. I did not think that people could have different colored hair or that noses could fit so many ways onto faces. I was judging by my own appearance, but I suppose any fool can walk on his hands and say the world is upside down!" He laughed and sobered. "But then why wear spacesuits? The air is breathable."

"For safety," June told him. "We can't take any chances on plague."

Pat Mead was wearing nothing but a loin cloth and his weapons, and the wind ruffled his hair. He looked comfortable, and they longed to take off the stuffy spacesuits and feel the wind against their own skins. Minos was like home, like Earth.... But they were strangers.

"Plague," Pat Mead said thoughtfully. "We had one here. It came two years after the colony arrived and killed everyone except the Mead families. They were immune. I guess we look alike because we're all related, and that's why I grew up thinking that it is the only way people can look."

Plague. "What was the disease?" Hal Barton asked.

"Pretty gruesome, according to my father. They called it the melting sickness. The doctors died too soon to find out what it was or what to do about it."

"You should have trained for more doctors, or sent to civilization for some." A trace of impatience was in George Barton's voice.

Pat Mead explained patiently, "Our ship, with the power plant and all the books we needed, went off into the sky to avoid the contagion, and never came back. The crew must have died." Long years of hardship were indicated by that statement, a colony with electric power gone and machinery stilled, with key technicians dead and no way to replace them. June realized then the full meaning of the primitive sheath knife and bow.

"Any recurrence of melting sickness?" asked Hal Barton.

"No."

"Any other diseases?"

"Not a one."

Max was eyeing the bronze red-headed figure with something approaching awe. "Do you think all the Meads look like that?" he said to June on the intercom. "I wouldn't mind being a Mead myself!"

* * * * *

Their job had been made easy by the coming of Pat. They went back to the ship laughing, exchanging anecdotes with him. There was nothing now to keep Minos from being the home they wanted, except the melting sickness, and, forewarned against it, they could take precautions.

The polished silver and black column of the _Explorer_ seemed to rise higher and higher over the trees as they neared it. Then its symmetry blurred all sense of specific size as they stepped out from among the trees and stood on the edge of the meadow, looking up.

"Nice!" said Pat. "Beautiful!" The admiration in his voice was warming.

"It was a yacht," Max said, still looking up, "second hand, an old-time beauty without a sign of wear. Synthetic diamond-studded control board and murals on the walls. It doesn't have the new speed drives, but it brought us thirty-six light years in one and a half subjective years. Plenty good enough."

The tall tanned man looked faintly wistful, and June realized that he had never had access to a full library, never seen a movie, never experienced luxury. He had been born and raised on Minos.

* * * * *

"May I go aboard?" Pat asked hopefully.

Max unslung the specimen kit from his shoulder, laid it on the carpet of plants that covered the ground and began to open it.

"Tests first," Hal Barton said. "We have to find out if you people still carry this so-called melting sickness. We'll have to de-microbe you and take specimens before we let you on board. Once on, you'll be no good as a check for what the other Meads might have."

Max was taking out a rack and a stand of preservative bottles and hypodermics.

"Are you going to jab me with those?" Pat asked with interest.

"You're just a specimen animal to me, bud!" Max grinned at Pat Mead, and Pat grinned back. June saw that they were friends already, the tall pantherish colonist, and the wry, black-haired doctor. She felt a stab of guilt because she loved Max and yet could pity him for being smaller and frailer than Pat Mead.

"Lie down," Max told him, "and hold still. We need two spinal fluid samples from the back, a body cavity one in front, and another from the

arm."

Pat lay down obediently. Max knelt, and, as he spoke, expertly swabbed and inserted needles with the smooth speed that had made him a fine nerve surgeon on Earth.

High above them the scout helioplane came out of an opening in the ship and angled off toward the west, its buzz diminishing. Then, suddenly, it veered and headed back, and Reno Unrich's voice came tinnily from their earphones:

"What's that you've got? Hey, what are you docs doing down there?" He banked again and came to a stop, hovering fifty feet away. June could see his startled face looking through the glass at Pat.

Hal Barton switched to a narrow radio beam, explained rapidly and pointed in the direction of Alexandria. Reno's plane lifted and flew away over the odd-colored forest.

"The plane will drop a note on your town, telling them you got through to us," Hal Barton told Pat, who was sitting up watching Max dexterously put the blood and spinal fluids into the right bottles without exposing them to air.

"We won't be free to contact your people until we know if they still carry melting sickness," Max added. "You might be immune so it doesn't show on you, but still carry enough germs--if that's what caused it--to wipe out a planet."

"If you do carry melting sickness," said Hal Barton, "we won't be able to mingle with your people until we've cleared them of the disease."

"Starting with me?" Pat asked.

"Starting with you," Max told him ruefully, "as soon as you step on board."

"More needles?"

"Yes, and a few little extras thrown in."

"Rough?"

"It isn't easy."

A few minutes later, standing in the stalls for spacesuit decontamination, being buffeted by jets of hot disinfectant, bathed in glares of sterilizing ultraviolet radiation, June remembered that and compared Pat Mead's treatment to theirs.

In the _Explorer_, stored carefully in sealed tanks and containers, was the ultimate, multi-purpose cureall. It was a solution of enzymes so like the key catalysts of the human cell nucleus that it caused chemical derangement and disintegration in any non-human cell. Nothing could live in contact with it but human cells; any alien intruder to the body would die. Nucleocat Cureall was its trade name.

But the cureall alone was not enough for complete safety. Plagues had been known to slay too rapidly and universally to be checked by human

treatment. Doctors are not reliable; they die. Therefore spaceways and interplanetary health law demanded that ship equipment for guarding against disease be totally mechanical in operation, rapid and efficient.

Somewhere near them, in a series of stalls which led around and around like a rabbit maze, Pat was being herded from stall to stall by peremptory mechanical voices, directed to soap and shower, ordered to insert his arm into a slot which took a sample of his blood, given solutions to drink, bathed in germicidal ultraviolet, shaken by sonic blasts, breathing air thick with sprays of germicidal mists, being directed to put his arms into other slots where they were anesthetized and injected with various immunizing solutions.

Finally, he would be put in a room of high temperature and extreme dryness, and instructed to sit for half an hour while more fluids were dripped into his veins through long thin tubes.

All legal spaceships were built for safety. No chance was taken of allowing a suspected carrier to bring an infection on board with him.

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June stepped from the last shower stall into the locker room, zipped off her spacesuit with a sigh of relief, and contemplated herself in a wall mirror. Red hair, dark blue eyes, tall....

"I've got a good figure," she said thoughtfully.

Max turned at the door. "Why this sudden interest in your looks?" he asked suspiciously. "Do we stand here and admire you, or do we finally get something to eat?"

"Wait a minute." She went to a wall phone and dialed it carefully, using a combination from the ship's directory. "How're you doing, Pat?"

The phone picked up a hissing of water or spray. There was a startled chuckle. "Voices, too! Hello, June. How do you tell a machine to go jump in the lake?"

"Are you hungry?"

"No food since yesterday."

"We'll have a banquet ready for you when you get out," she told Pat and hung up, smiling. Pat Mead's voice had a vitality and enjoyment which made shipboard talk sound like sad artificial gaiety in contrast.

They looked into the nearby small laboratory where twelve squealing hamsters were protestingly submitting to a small injection each of Pat's blood. In most of them the injection was followed by one of antihistaminics and adaptives. Otherwise the hamster defense system would treat all non-hamster cells as enemies, even the harmless human blood cells, and fight back against them violently.

One hamster, the twelfth, was given an extra large dose of adaptive, so that if there were a disease, he would not fight it or the human cells, and thus succumb more rapidly.

"How ya doing, George?" Max asked.

"Routine," George Barton grunted absently.

On the way up the long spiral ramps to the dining hall, they passed a viewplate. It showed a long scene of mountains in the distance on the horizon, and between them, rising step by step as they grew farther away, the low rolling hills, bronze and red with patches of clear green where there were fields.

Someone was looking out, standing very still, as if she had been there a long time--Bess St. Clair, a Canadian woman. "It looks like Winnipeg," she told them as they paused. "When are you doctors going to let us out of this blithering barberpole? Look," she pointed. "See that patch of field on the south hillside, with the brook winding through it? I've staked that hillside for our house. When do we get out?"

* * * * *

Reno Ulrich's tiny scout plane buzzed slowly in from the distance and began circling lazily.

"Sooner than you think," Max told her. "We've discovered a castaway colony on the planet. They've done our tests for us by just living here. If there's anything here to catch, they've caught it."

"People on Minos?" Bess's handsome ruddy face grew alive with excitement.

"One of them is down in the medical department," June said. "He'll be out in twenty minutes."

"May I go see him?"

"Sure," said Max. "Show him the way to the dining hall when he gets out. Tell him we sent you."

"Right!" She turned and ran down the ramp like a small girl going to a fire. Max grinned at June and she grinned back. After a year and a half of isolation in space, everyone was hungry for the sight of new faces, the sound of unfamiliar voices.

* * * * *

They climbed the last two turns to the cafeteria, and entered to a rich subdued blend of soft music and quiet conversations. The cafeteria was a section of the old dining room, left when the rest of the ship had been converted to living and working quarters, and it still had the original finely grained wood of the ceiling and walls, the sound absorbency, the soft music spools and the intimate small light at each table where people leisurely ate and talked.

They stood in line at the hot foods counter, and behind her June could hear a girl's voice talking excitedly through the murmur of conversation.

"--new man, honest! I saw him through the viewplate when they came in. He's down in the medical department. A real frontiersman."

The line drew abreast of the counters, and she and Max chose three

heaping trays, starting with hydroponic mushroom steak, raised in the growing trays of water and chemicals; sharp salad bowl with rose tomatoes and aromatic peppers; tank-grown fish with special sauce; four different desserts, and assorted beverages.

Presently they had three tottering trays successfully maneuvered to a table. Brant St. Clair came over. "I beg your pardon, Max, but they are saying something about Reno carrying messages to a colony of savages, for the medical department. Will he be back soon, do you know?"

Max smiled up at him, his square face affectionate. Everyone liked the shy Canadian. "He's back already. We just saw him come in."

"Oh, fine." St. Clair beamed. "I had an appointment with him to go out and confirm what looks like a nice vein of iron to the northeast. Have you seen Bess? Oh--there she is." He turned swiftly and hurried away.

A very tall man with fiery red hair came in surrounded by an eagerly talking crowd of ship people. It was Pat Mead. He stood in the doorway, alertly scanning the dining room. Sheer vitality made him seem even larger than he was. Sighting June, he smiled and began to thread toward their table.

"Look!" said someone. "There's the colonist!" Shelia, a pretty, jeweled woman, followed and caught his arm. "Did you _really_ swim across a river to come here?"

Overflowing with good-will and curiosity, people approached from all directions. "Did you actually walk three hundred miles? Come, eat with us. Let me help choose your tray."

Everyone wanted him to eat at their table, everyone was a specialist and wanted data about Minos. They all wanted anecdotes about hunting wild animals with a bow and arrow.

"He needs to be rescued," Max said. "He won't have a chance to eat."

June and Max got up firmly, edged through the crowd, captured Pat and escorted him back to their table. June found herself pleased to be claiming the hero of the hour.

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Pat sat in the simple, subtly designed chair and leaned back almost voluptuously, testing the way it gave and fitted itself to him. He ran his eyes over the bright tableware and heaped plates. He looked around at the rich grained walls and soft lights at each table. He said nothing, just looking and feeling and experiencing.

"When we build our town and leave the ship," June explained, "we will turn all the staterooms back into the lounges and ballrooms and cocktail bars that used to be inside."

"Oh, I'm not complaining," Pat said negligently. He cocked his head to the music, and tried to locate its source.

"That's big of you," said Max with gentle irony.

They fell to, Pat beginning the first meal he had had in more than a

day.

Most of the other diners finished when they were halfway through, and began walking over, diffidently at first, then in another wave of smiling faces, handshakes, and introductions. Pat was asked about crops, about farming methods, about rainfall and floods, about farm animals and plant breeding, about the compatibility of imported Earth seeds with local ground, about mines and strata.

There was no need to protect him. He leaned back in his chair and drawled answers with the lazy ease of a panther; where he could think of no statistic, he would fill the gap with an anecdote. It developed that he enjoyed spinning campfire yarns and especially being the center of interest.

Between bouts of questions, he ate with undiminished and glowing relish.

June noticed that the female specialists were prolonging the questions more than they needed, clustering around the table laughing at his jokes, until presently Pat was almost surrounded by pretty faces, eager questions, and chiming laughs. Shelia the beautiful laughed most chimingly of all.

June nudged Max, and Max shrugged indifferently. It wasn't anything a man would pay attention to, perhaps. But June watched Pat for a moment more, then glanced uneasily back to Max. He was eating and listening to Pat's answers and did not feel her gaze. For some reason Max looked almost shrunken to her. He was shorter than she had realized; she had forgotten that he was only the same height as herself. She was dimly aware of the clear lilting chatter of female voices increasing at Pat's end of the table.

"That guy's a menace," Max said, and laughed to himself, cutting another slice of hydroponic mushroom steak. "What's eating you?" he added, glancing aside at her when he noticed her sudden stillness.

"Nothing," she said hastily, but she did not turn back to watching Pat Mead. She felt disloyal. Pat was only a superb animal. Max was the man she loved. Or--was he? Of course he was, she told herself angrily. They had gone colonizing together because they wanted to spend their lives together; she had never thought of marrying any other man. Yet the sense of dissatisfaction persisted, and along with it a feeling of guilt.

Len Marlow, the protein tank-culture technician responsible for the mushroom steaks, had wormed his way into the group and asked Pat a question. Now he was saying, "I don't dig you, Pat. It sounds like you're putting the people into the tanks instead of the vegetables!" He glanced at them, looking puzzled. "See if you two can make anything of this. It sounds medical to me."

Pat leaned back and smiled, sipping a glass of hydroponic burgundy. "Wonderful stuff. You'll have to show us how to make it."

Len turned back to him. "You people live off the country, right? You hunt and bring in steaks and eat them, right? Well, say I have one of those steaks right here and I want to eat it, what happens?"

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"Go ahead and eat it. It just wouldn't digest. You'd stay hungry."

"Why?" Len was aggrieved.

"Chemical differences in the basic protoplasm of Minos. Different amino linkages, left-handed instead of right-handed molecules in the carbohydrates, things like that. Nothing will be digestible here until you are adapted chemically by a little test-tube evolution. Till then you'd starve to death on a full stomach."

Pat's side of the table had been loaded with the dishes from two trays, but it was almost clear now and the dishes were stacked neatly to one side. He started on three desserts, thoughtfully tasting each in turn.

"Test-tube evolution?" Max repeated. "What's that? I thought you people had no doctors."

"It's a story." Pat leaned back again. "Alexander P. Mead, the head of the Mead clan, was a plant geneticist, a very determined personality and no man to argue with. He didn't want us to go through the struggle of killing off all Minos plants and putting in our own, spoiling the face of the planet and upsetting the balance of its ecology. He decided that he would adapt our genes to this planet or kill us trying. He did it all right."

"Did which?" asked June, suddenly feeling a sourceless prickle of fear.

"Adapted us to Minos. He took human cells--"

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She listened intently, trying to find a reason for fear in the explanation. It would have taken many human generations to adapt to Minos by ordinary evolution, and that only at a heavy toll of death and hunger which evolution exacts. There was a shorter way: Human cells have the ability to return to their primeval condition of independence, hunting, eating and reproducing alone.

Alexander P. Mead took human cells and made them into phagocytes. He put them through the hard savage school of evolution--a thousand generations of multiplication, hardship and hunger, with the alien indigestible food always present, offering its reward of plenty to the cell that reluctantly learned to absorb it.

"Leucocytes can run through several thousand generations of evolution in six months," Pat Mead finished. "When they reached to a point where they would absorb Minos food, he planted them back in the people he had taken them from."

"What was supposed to happen then?" Max asked, leaning forward.

"I don't know exactly how it worked. He never told anybody much about it, and when I was a little boy he had gone loco and was wandering ha-ha-ing around waving a test tube. Fell down a ravine and broke his neck at the age of eighty."

"A character," Max said.

Why was she afraid? "It worked then?"

"Yes. He tried it on all the Meads the first year. The other settlers didn't want to be experimented on until they saw how it worked out. It worked. The Meads could hunt, and plant while the other settlers were still eating out of hydroponics tanks."

"It worked," said Max to Len. "You're a plant geneticist and a tank culture expert. There's a job for you."

"Uh-uh-!" Len backed away. "It sounds like a medical problem to me. Human cell control--right up your alley."

"It is a one-way street," Pat warned. "Once it is done, you won't be able to digest ship food. I'll get no good from this protein. I ate it just for the taste."

Hal Barton appeared quietly beside the table. "Three of the twelve test hamsters have died," he reported, and turned to Pat. "Your people carry the germs of melting sickness, as you call it. The dead hamsters were injected with blood taken from you before you were de-infected. We can't settle here unless we de-infect everybody on Minos. Would they object?"

"We wouldn't want to give you folks germs," Pat smiled. "Anything for safety. But there'll have to be a vote on it first."

The doctors went to Reno Ulrich's table and walked with him to the hangar, explaining. He was to carry the proposal to Alexandria, mingle with the people, be persuasive and wait for them to vote before returning. He was to give himself shots of cureall every two hours on the hour or run the risk of disease.

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Reno was pleased. He had dabbled in sociology before retraining as a mechanic for the expedition. "This gives me a chance to study their mores." He winked wickedly. "I may not be back for several nights." They watched through the viewplate as he took off, and then went over to the laboratory for a look at the hamsters.

Three were alive and healthy, munching lettuce. One was the control; the other two had been given shots of Pat's blood from before he entered the ship, but with no additional treatment. Apparently a hamster could fight off melting sickness easily if left alone. Three were still feverish and ruffled, with a low red blood count, but recovering. The three dead ones had been given strong shots of adaptive and counter histamine, so their bodies had not fought back against the attack.

June glanced at the dead animals hastily and looked away again. They lay twisted with a strange semi-fluid limpness, as if ready to dissolve. The last hamster, which had been given the heaviest dose of adaptive, had apparently lost all its hair before death. It was hairless and pink, like a still-born baby.

"We can find no micro-organisms," George Barton said. "None at all. Nothing in the body that should not be there. Leucosis and anemia. Fever only for the ones that fought it off." He handed Max some

temperature charts and graphs of blood counts.

June wandered out into the hall. Pediatrics and obstetrics were her field; she left the cellular research to Max, and just helped him with laboratory routine. The strange mood followed her out into the hall, then abruptly lightened.

Coming toward her, busily telling a tale of adventure to the gorgeous Shelia Davenport, was a tall, red-headed, magnificently handsome man. It was his handsomeness which made Pat such a pleasure to look upon and talk with, she guiltily told herself, and it was his tremendous vitality.... It was like meeting a movie hero in the flesh, or a hero out of the pages of a book--Deer-slayer, John Clayton, Lord Greystoke.

She waited in the doorway to the laboratory and made no move to join them, merely acknowledged the two with a nod and a smile and a casual lift of the hand. They nodded and smiled back.

"Hello, June," said Pat and continued telling his tale, but as they passed he lightly touched her arm.

"Oh, pioneer!" she said mockingly and softly to his passing profile, and knew that he had heard.

* * * * *

That night she had a nightmare. She was running down a long corridor looking for Max, but every man she came to was a big bronze man with red hair and bright blue eyes who grinned at her.

The pink hamster! She woke suddenly, feeling as if alarm bells had been ringing, and listened carefully, but there was no sound. She had had a nightmare, she told herself, but alarm bells were still ringing in her unconscious. Something was wrong.

Lying still and trying to preserve the images, she groped for a meaning, but the mood faded under the cold touch of reason. Damn intuitive thinking! A pink hamster! Why did the unconscious have to be so vague? She fell asleep again and forgot.

They had lunch with Pat Mead that day, and after it was over Pat delayed June with a hand on her shoulder and looked down at her for a moment. "I want you, June," he said and then turned away, answering the hails of a party at another table as if he had not spoken. She stood shaken, and then walked to the door where Max waited.

She was particularly affectionate with Max the rest of the day, and it pleased him. He would not have been if he had known why. She tried to forget Pat's blunt statement.

June was in the laboratory with Max, watching the growth of a small tank culture of the alien protoplasm from a Minos weed, and listening to Len Marlow pour out his troubles.

"And Elsie tags around after that big goof all day, listening to his stories. And then she tells me I'm just jealous, I'm imagining things!" He passed his hand across his eyes. "I came away from Earth to be with Elsie.... I'm getting a headache. Look, can't you persuade Pat to cut it out, June? You and Max are his friends."

"Here, have an aspirin," June said. "We'll see what we can do."

"Thanks." Len picked up his tank culture and went out, not at all cheered.

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Max sat brooding over the dials and meters at his end of the laboratory, apparently sunk in thought. When Len had gone, he spoke almost harshly.

"Why encourage the guy? Why let him hope?"

"Found out anything about the differences in protoplasm?" she evaded.

"Why let him kid himself? What chance has he got against that hunk of muscle and smooth talk?"

"But Pat isn't after Elsie," she protested.

"Every scatter-brained woman on this ship is trailing after Pat with her tongue hanging out. Brant St. Clair is in the bar right now. He doesn't say what he is drinking about, but do you think Pat is resisting all these women crowding down on him?"

"There are other things besides looks and charm," she said, grimly trying to concentrate on a slide under her binocular microscope.

"Yeah, and whatever they are, Pat has them, too. Who's more competent to support a woman and a family on a frontier planet than a handsome bruiser who was born here?"

"I meant," June spun around on her stool with unexpected passion, "there is old friendship, and there's fondness, and memories, and loyalty!" She was half shouting.

"They're not worth much on the second-hand market," Max said. He was sitting slumped on his lab stool, looking dully at his dials. "Now _I'm_ getting a headache!" He smiled ruefully. "No kidding, a real headache. And over other people's troubles yet!"

Other people's troubles.... She got up and wandered out into the long curving halls. "I want you June," Pat's voice repeated in her mind. Why did the man have to be so overpoweringly attractive, so glaring a contrast to Max? Why couldn't the universe manage to run on without generating troublesome love triangles?

* * * * *

She walked up the curving ramps to the dining hall where they had eaten and drunk and talked yesterday. It was empty except for one couple talking forehead to forehead over cold coffee.

She turned and wandered down the long easy spiral of corridor to the pharmacy and dispensary. It was empty. George was probably in the test lab next door, where he could hear if he was wanted. The automatic vendor of harmless euphorics, stimulants and opiates stood in the corner, brightly decorated in pastel abstract designs, with its

automatic tabulator graph glowing above it.

Max had a headache, she remembered. She recorded her thumbprint in the machine and pushed the plunger for a box of aspirins, trying to focus her attention on the problem of adapting the people of the ship to the planet Minos. An aquarium tank with a faint solution of histamine would be enough to convert a piece of human skin into a community of voracious active phagocytes individually seeking something to devour, but could they eat enough to live away from the rich sustaining plasma of human blood?

After the aspirins, she pushed another plunger for something for herself. Then she stood looking at it, a small box with three pills in her hand--Theobromine, a heart strengthener and a confidence-giving euphoric all in one, something to steady shaky nerves. She had used it before only in emergency. She extended a hand and looked at it. It was trembling. Damn triangles!

While she was looking at her hand there was a click from the automatic drug vendor. It summed the morning use of each drug in the vendors throughout the ship, and recorded it in a neat addition to the end of each graph line. For a moment she could not find the green line for anodynes and the red line for stimulants, and then she saw that they went almost straight up.

There were too many being used--far too many to be explained by jealousy or psychosomatic peevishness. This was an epidemic, and only one disease was possible!

The disinfecting of Pat had not succeeded. Nucleocat Cureall, killer of all infections, had not cured! Pat had brought melting sickness into the ship with him!

Who had it?

The drugs vendor glowed cheerfully, uncommunicative. She opened a panel in its side and looked in on restless interlacing cogs, and on the inside of the door saw printed some directions.... "To remove or examine records before reaching end of the reel--"

After a few fumbling minutes she had the answer. In the cafeteria at breakfast and lunch, thirty-eight men out of the forty-eight aboard ship had taken more than his norm of stimulant. Twenty-one had taken aspirin as well. The only woman who had made an unusual purchase was herself!

She remembered the hamsters that had thrown off the infection with a short sharp fever, and checked back in the records to the day before. There was a short rise in aspirin sales to women at late afternoon. The women were safe.

It was the men who had melting sickness!

Melting sickness killed in hours, according to Pat Mead. How long had the men been sick?

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As she was leaving, Jerry came into the pharmacy, recorded his

thumbprint and took a box of aspirin from the machine.

She felt all right. Self-control was working well and it was pleasant still to walk down the corridor smiling at the people who passed. She took the emergency elevator to the control room and showed her credentials to the technician on watch.

"Medical Emergency." At a small control panel in the corner was a large red button, precisely labeled. She considered it and picked up the control room phone. This was the hard part, telling someone, especially someone who had it--Max.

She dialed, and when the click on the end of the line showed he had picked the phone up, she told Max what she had seen.

"No women, just the men," he repeated. "That right?"

"Yes."

"Probably it's chemically alien, inhibited by one of the female sex hormones. We'll try sex hormone shots, if we have to. Where are you calling from?"

She told him.

"That's right. Give Nucleocat Cureall another chance. It might work this time. Push that button."

She went to the panel and pushed the large red button. Through the long height of the _Explorer_, bells woke to life and began to ring in frightened clangor, emergency doors thumped shut, mechanical apparatus hummed into life and canned voices began to give rapid urgent directions.

A plague had come.

* * * * *

She obeyed the mechanical orders, went out into the hall and walked in line with the others. The captain walked ahead of her and the gorgeous Shelia Davenport fell into step beside her. "I look like a positive hag this morning. Does that mean I'm sick? Are we all sick?"

June shrugged, unwilling to say what she knew.

Others came out of all rooms into the corridor, thickening the line. They could hear each room lock as the last person left it, and then, faintly, the hiss of disinfectant spray. Behind them, on the heels of the last person in line, segments of the ship slammed off and began to hiss.

They wound down the spiral corridor until they reached the medical treatment section again, and there they waited in line.

"It won't scar my arms, will it?" asked Shelia apprehensively, glancing at her smooth, lovely arms.

The mechanical voice said, "Next. Step inside, please, and stand clear of the door."

"Not a bit," June reassured Shelia, and stepped into the cubicle.

Inside, she was directed from cubicle to cubicle and given the usual buffeting by sprays and radiation, had blood samples taken and was injected with Nucleocat and a series of other protectives. At last she was directed through another door into a tiny cubicle with a chair.

"You are to wait here," commanded the recorded voice metallically. "In twenty minutes the door will unlock and you may then leave. All people now treated may visit all parts of the ship which have been protected. It is forbidden to visit any quarantined or unsterile part of the ship without permission from the medical officers."

Presently the door unlocked and she emerged into bright lights again, feeling slightly battered.

She was in the clinic. A few men sat on the edge of beds and looked sick. One was lying down. Brant and Bess St. Clair sat near each other, not speaking.

Approaching her was George Barton, reading a thermometer with a puzzled expression.

"What is it, George?" she asked anxiously.

"Some of the women have slight fever, but it's going down. None of the fellows have any--but their white count is way up, their red count is way down, and they look sick to me."

She approached St. Clair. His usually ruddy cheeks were pale, his pulse was light and too fast, and his skin felt clammy. "How's the headache? Did the Nucleocat treatment help?"

"I feel worse, if anything."

"Better set up beds," she told George. "Get everyone back into the clinic."

"We're doing that," George assured her. "That's what Hal is doing."

She went back to the laboratory. Max was pacing up and down, absently running his hands through his black hair until it stood straight up. He stopped when he saw her face, and scowled thoughtfully. "They are still sick?" It was more a statement than a question.

She nodded.

"The Cureall didn't cure this time," he muttered. "That leaves it up to us. We have melting sickness and according to Pat and the hamsters, that leaves us less than a day to find out what it is and learn how to stop it."

Suddenly an idea for another test struck him and he moved to the work table to set it up. He worked rapidly, with an occasional uncoordinated movement betraying his usual efficiency.

It was strange to see Max troubled and afraid.

She put on a laboratory smock and began to work. She worked in silence. The mechanicals had failed. Hal and George Barton were busy staving off death from the weaker cases and trying to gain time for Max and her to work. The problem of the plague had to be solved by the two of them alone. It was in their hands.

Another test, no results. Another test, no results. Max's hands were shaking and he stopped a moment to take stimulants.

She went into the ward for a moment, found Bess and warned her quietly to tell the other women to be ready to take over if the men became too sick to go on. "But tell them calmly. We don't want to frighten the men." She lingered in the ward long enough to see the word spread among the women in a widening wave of paler faces and compressed lips; then she went back to the laboratory.

Another test. There was no sign of a micro-organism in anyone's blood, merely a growing horde of leucocytes and phagocytes, prowling as if mobilized to repel invasion.

* * * * *

Len Marlow was wheeled in unconscious, with Hal Barton's written comments and conclusions pinned to the blanket.

"I don't feel so well myself," the assistant complained. "The air feels thick. I can't breathe."

June saw that his lips were blue. "Oxygen short," she told Max.

"Low red corpuscle count," Max answered. "Look into a drop and see what's going on. Use mine; I feel the same way he does." She took two drops of Max's blood. The count was low, falling too fast.

Breathing is useless without the proper minimum of red corpuscles in the blood. People below that minimum die of asphyxiation although their lungs are full of pure air. The red corpuscle count was falling too fast. The time she and Max had to work in was too short.

"Pump some more CO₂ into the air system," Max said urgently over the phone. "Get some into the men's end of the ward."

* * * * *

She looked through the microscope at the live sample of blood. It was a dark clear field and bright moving things spun and swirled through it, but she could see nothing that did not belong there.

"Hal," Max called over the general speaker system, "cut the other treatments, check for accelerating anemia. Treat it like monoxide poisoning--CO₂ and oxygen."

She reached into a cupboard under the work table, located two cylinders of oxygen, cracked the valves and handed one to Max and one to the assistant. Some of the bluish tint left the assistant's face as he breathed and he went over to the patient with reawakened concern.

"Not breathing, Doc!"

Max was working at the desk, muttering equations of hemoglobin catalysis.

"Len's gone, Doc," the assistant said more loudly.

"Artificial respiration and get him into a regeneration tank," said June, not moving from the microscope. "Hurry! Hal will show you how. The oxidation and mechanical heart action in the tank will keep him going. Put anyone in a tank who seems to be dying. Get some women to help you. Give them Hal's instructions."

The tanks were ordinarily used to suspend animation in a nutrient bath during the regrowth of any diseased organ. It could preserve life in an almost totally destroyed body during the usual disintegration and regrowth treatments for cancer and old age, and it could encourage healing as destruction continued ... but they could not prevent ultimate death as long as the disease was not conquered.

The drop of blood in June's microscope was a great, dark field, and in the foreground, brought to gargantuan solidity by the stereo effect, drifted neat saucer shapes of red blood cells. They turned end for end, floating by the humped misty mass of a leucocyte which was crawling on the cover glass. There were not enough red corpuscles, and she felt that they grew fewer as she watched.

She fixed her eye on one, not blinking in fear that she would miss what might happen. It was a tidy red button, and it spun as it drifted, the current moving it aside in a curve as it passed by the leucocyte.

Then, abruptly, the cell vanished.

June stared numbly at the place where it had been.

Behind her, Max was calling over the speaker system again: "Dr. Stark speaking. Any technician who knows anything about the life tanks, start bringing more out of storage and set them up. Emergency."

"We may need forty-seven," June said quietly.

"We may need forty-seven," Max repeated to the ship in general. His voice did not falter. "Set them up along the corridor. Hook them in on extension lines."

His voice filtered back from the empty floors above in a series of dim echoes. What he had said meant that every man on board might be on the point of heart stoppage.

* * * * *

June looked blindly through the binocular microscope, trying to think. Out of the corner of her eyes she could see that Max was wavering and breathing more and more frequently of the pure, cold, burning oxygen of the cylinders. In the microscope she could see that there were fewer red cells left alive in the drop of his blood. The rate of fall was accelerating.

She didn't have to glance at Max to know how he would look--skin pale, black eyebrows and keen brown eyes slightly squinted in thought, a faint ironical grin twisting the bluing lips. Intelligent, thin,

sensitive, his face was part of her mind. It was inconceivable that Max could die. He couldn't die. He couldn't leave her alone.

She forced her mind back to the problem. All the men of the _Explorer_ were at the same point, wherever they were.

Moving to Max's desk, she spoke into the intercom system: "Bess, send a couple of women to look through the ship, room by room, with a stretcher. Make sure all the men are down here." She remembered Reno. "Sparks, heard anything from Reno? Is he back?"

Sparks replied weakly after a lag. "The last I heard from Reno was a call this morning. He was raving about mirrors, and Pat Mead's folks not being real people, just carbon copies, and claiming he was crazy; and I should send him the psychiatrist. I thought he was kidding. He didn't call back."

"Thanks, Sparks." Reno was lost.

Max dialed and spoke to the bridge over the phone. "Are you okay up there? Forget about engineering controls. Drop everything and head for the tanks while you can still walk."

June went back to the work table and whispered into her own phone. "Bess, send up a stretcher for Max. He looks pretty bad."

There had to be a solution. The life tanks could sustain life in a damaged body, encouraging it to regrow more rapidly, but they merely slowed death as long as the disease was not checked. The postponement could not last long, for destruction could go on steadily in the tanks until the nutritive solution would hold no life except the triumphant microscopic killers that caused melting sickness.

There were very few red blood corpuscles in the microscope field now, incredibly few. She tipped the microscope and they began to drift, spinning slowly. A lone corpuscle floated through the center. She watched it as the current swept it in an arc past the dim off-focus bulk of the leucocyte. There was a sweep of motion and it vanished.

For a moment it meant nothing to her; then she lifted her head from the microscope and looked around. Max sat at his desk, head in hand, his rumpled short black hair sticking out between his fingers at odd angles. A pencil and a pad scrawled with formulas lay on the desk before him. She could see his concentration in the rigid set of his shoulders. He was still thinking; he had not given up.

* * * * *

"Max, I just saw a leucocyte grab a red blood corpuscle. It was unbelievably fast."

"Leukemia," muttered Max without moving. "Gallopig leukemia yet! That comes under the heading of cancer. Well, that's part of the answer. It might be all we need." He grinned feebly and reached for the speaker set. "Anybody still on his feet in there?" he muttered into it, and the question was amplified to a booming voice throughout the ship. "Hal, are you still going? Look, Hal, change all the dials, change the dials, set them to deep melt and regeneration. One week. This is like leukemia. Got it? This is like leukemia."

June rose. It was time for her to take over the job. She leaned across his desk and spoke into the speaker system. "Doctor Walton talking," she said. "This is to the women. Don't let any of the men work any more; they'll kill themselves. See that they all go into the tanks right away. Set the tank dials for deep regeneration. You can see how from the ones that are set."

Two exhausted and frightened women clattered in the doorway with a stretcher. Their hands were scratched and oily from helping to set up tanks.

"That order includes you," she told Max sternly and caught him as he swayed.

Max saw the stretcher bearers and struggled upright. "Ten more minutes," he said clearly. "Might think of an idea. Something not right in this setup. I have to figure how to prevent a relapse, how the thing started."

He knew more bacteriology than she did; she had to help him think. She motioned the bearers to wait, fixed a breathing mask for Max from a cylinder of CO₂ and the opened one of oxygen. Max went back to his desk.

She walked up and down, trying to think, remembering the hamsters. The melting sickness, it was called. Melting. She struggled with an impulse to open a tank which held one of the men. She wanted to look in, see if that would explain the name.

Melting Sickness....

Footsteps came and Pat Mead stood uncertainly in the doorway. Tall, handsome, rugged, a pioneer. "Anything I can do?" he asked.

She barely looked at him. "You can stay out of our way. We're busy."

"I'd like to help," he said.

"Very funny." She was vicious, enjoying the whip of her words. "Every man is dying because you're a carrier, and you want to help."

* * * * *

He stood nervously clenching and unclenching his hands. "A guinea pig, maybe. I'm immune. All the Meads are."

"Go away." God, why couldn't she think? What makes a Mead immune?

"Aw, let 'im alone," Max muttered. "Pat hasn't done anything." He went waveringly to the microscope, took a tiny sliver from his finger, suspended it in a slide and slipped it under the lens with detached habitual dexterity. "Something funny going on," he said to June. "Symptoms don't feel right."

After a moment he straightened and motioned for her to look. "Leucocytes, phagocytes--" He was bewildered. "My own--"

She looked in, and then looked back at Pat in a growing wave of

horror. "They're not your own, Max!" she whispered.

Max rested a hand on the table to brace himself, put his eye to the microscope, and looked again. June knew what he saw. Phagocytes, leucocytes, attacking and devouring his tissues in a growing incredible horde, multiplying insanely.

Not his phagocytes! Pat Mead's! The Meads' evolved cells had learned too much. They were contagious. And not Pat Mead's.... How much alike _were_ the Meads?... Mead cells contagious from one to another, not a disease attacking or being fought, but acting as normal leucocytes in whatever body they were in! The leucocytes of tall, red-headed people, finding no strangeness in the bloodstream of any of the tall, red-headed people. No strangeness.... A toti-potent leucocyte finding its way into cellular wombs.

The womblike life tanks. For the men of the _Explorer_, a week's cure with deep melting to de-differentiate the leucocytes and turn them back to normal tissue, then regrowth and reforming from the cells that were there. From the cells that _were_ there. _From the cells that were there...._

"Pat--"

"I know." Pat began to laugh, his face twisted with sudden understanding. "I understand. I get it. I'm a contagious personality. That's funny, isn't it?"

Max rose suddenly from the microscope and lurched toward him, fists clenched. Pat caught him as he fell, and the bewildered stretcher bearers carried him out to the tanks.

* * * * *

For a week June tended the tanks. The other women volunteered to help, but she refused. She said nothing, hoping her guess would not be true.

"Is everything all right?" Elsie asked her anxiously. "How is Jerry coming along?" Elsie looked haggard and worn, like all the women, from doing the work that the men had always done.

"He's fine," June said tonelessly, shutting tight the door of the tank room. "They're all fine."

"That's good," Elsie said, but she looked more frightened than before.

June firmly locked the tank room door and the girl went away.

The other women had been listening, and now they wandered back to their jobs, unsatisfied by June's answer, but not daring to ask for the actual truth. They were there whenever June went into the tank room, and they were still there--or relieved by others; June was not sure--when she came out. And always some one of them asked the unvarying question for all the others, and June gave the unvarying answer. But she kept the key. No woman but herself knew what was going on in the life tanks.

Then the day of completion came. June told no one of the hour. She went into the room as on the other days, locked the door behind her,

and there was the nightmare again. This time it was reality and she wandered down a path between long rows of coffinlike tanks, calling, "Max! Max!" silently and looking into each one as it opened.

But each face she looked at was the same. Watching them dissolve and regrow in the nutrient solution, she had only been able to guess at the horror of what was happening. Now she knew.

They were all the same lean-boned, blond-skinned face, with a pin-feather growth of reddish down on cheeks and scalp. All horribly--and handsomely--the same.

A medical kit lay carelessly on the floor beside Max's tank. She stood near the bag. "Max," she said, and found her throat closing. The canned voice of the mechanical mocked her, speaking glibly about waking and sitting up. "I'm sorry, Max...."

The tall man with rugged features and bright blue eyes sat up sleepily and lifted an eyebrow at her, and ran his hand over his red-fuzzed head in a gesture of bewilderment.

"What's the matter, June?" he asked drowsily.

She gripped his arm. "Max--"

He compared the relative size of his arm with her hand and said wonderingly, "You shrank."

"I know, Max. I know."

He turned his head and looked at his arms and legs, pale blond arms and legs with a down of red hair. He touched the thick left arm, squeezed a pinch of hard flesh. "It isn't mine," he said, surprised. "But I can feel it."

Watching his face was like watching a stranger mimicking and distorting Max's expressions. Max in fear. Max trying to understand what had happened to him, looking around at the other men sitting up in their tanks. Max feeling the terror that was in herself and all the men as they stared at themselves and their friends and saw what they had become.

"We're all Pat Mead," he said harshly. "All the Meads are Pat Mead. That's why he was surprised to see people who didn't look like himself."

"Yes, Max."

"Max," he repeated. "It's me, all right. The nervous system didn't change." His new blue eyes held hers. "My love didn't, either. Did yours? Did it, June?"

"No, Max." But she couldn't know yet. She had loved Max with the thin, ironic face, the rumpled black hair and the twisted smile that never really hid his quick sympathy. Now he was Pat Mead. Could he also be Max? "Of course I still love you, darling."

He grinned. It was still the wry smile of Max, though fitting strangely on the handsome new blond face. "Then it isn't so bad. It might even be pretty good. I envied him this big, muscular body. If Pat or any of

these Meads so much as looks at you, I'm going to knock his block off. Understand?"

* * * * *

She laughed and couldn't stop. It wasn't that funny. But it was still Max, trying to be unafraid, drawing on humor. Maybe the rest of the men would also be their old selves, enough so the women would not feel that their men were strangers.

Behind her, male voices spoke characteristically. She did not have to turn to know which was which: "This is one way to keep a guy from stealing your girl," that was Len Marlow; "I've got to write down all my reactions," Hal Barton; "Now I can really work that hillside vein of metal," St. Clair. Then others complaining, swearing, laughing bitterly at the trick that had been played on them and their flirting, tempted women. She knew who they were. Their women would know them apart, too.

"We'll go outside," Max said. "You and I. Maybe the shock won't be so bad to the women after they see me." He paused. "You didn't tell them, did you?"

"I couldn't. I wasn't sure. I--was hoping I was wrong."

She opened the door and closed it quickly. There was a small crowd on the other side.

"Hello, Pat," Elsie said uncertainly, trying to look past them into the tank room before the door shut.

"I'm not Pat, I'm Max," said the tall man with the blue eyes and the fuzz-reddened skull. "Listen--"

"Good heavens, Pat, what happened to your hair?" Shelia asked.

"I'm Max," insisted the man with the handsome face and the sharp blue eyes. "Don't you get it? I'm Max Stark. The melting sickness is Mead cells. We caught them from Pat. They adapted us to Minos. They also changed us all into Pat Mead."

The women stared at him, at each other. They shook their heads.

"They don't understand," June said. "I couldn't have if I hadn't seen it happening, Max."

"It's Pat," said Shelia, dazedly stubborn. "He shaved off his hair. It's some kind of joke."

Max shook her shoulders, glaring down at her face. "I'm Max. Max Stark. They all look like me. Do you hear? It's funny, but it's not a joke. Laugh for us, for God's sake!"

"It's too much," said June. "They'll have to see."

She opened the door and let them in. They hurried past her to the tanks, looking at forty-six identical blond faces, beginning to call in frightened voices:

"Jerry!"

"Harry!"

"Lee, where are you, sweetheart--"

June shut the door on the voices that were growing hysterical, the women terrified and helpless, the men shouting to let the women know who they were.

"It isn't easy," said Max, looking down at his own thick muscles. "But you aren't changed and the other girls aren't. That helps."

Through the muffled noise and hysteria, a bell was ringing.

"It's the airlock," June said.

Peering in the viewplate were nine Meads from Alexandria. To all appearances, eight of them were Pat Mead at various ages, from fifteen to fifty, and the other was a handsome, leggy, red-headed girl who could have been his sister.

Regretfully, they explained through the voice tube that they had walked over from Alexandria to bring news that the plane pilot had contracted melting sickness there and had died.

They wanted to come in.

* * * * *

June and Max told them to wait and returned to the tank room. The men were enjoying their new height and strength, and the women were bewilderedly learning that they could tell one Pat Mead from another, by voice, by gesture of face or hand. The panic was gone. In its place was a dull acceptance of the fantastic situation.

Max called for attention. "There are nine Meads outside who want to come in. They have different names, but they're all Pat Mead."

They frowned or looked blank, and George Barton asked, "Why didn't you let them in? I don't see any problem."

"One of them," said Max soberly, "is a girl. _Patricia_ Mead. The girl wants to come in."

There was a long silence while the implication settled to the fear center of the women's minds. Shelia the beautiful felt it first. She cried, "No! Please don't let her in!" There was real fright in her tone and the women caught it quickly.

Elsie clung to Jerry, begging, "You don't want me to change, do you, Jerry? You like me the way I am! Tell me you do!"

* * * * *

The other girls backed away. It was illogical, but it was human. June felt terror rising in herself. She held up her hand for quiet, and presented the necessity to the group.

"Only half of us can leave Minos," she said. "The men cannot eat

ship food; they've been conditioned to this planet. We women can go, but we would have to go without our men. We can't go outside without contagion, and we can't spend the rest of our lives in quarantine inside the ship. George Barton is right--there is no problem."

"But we'd be changed!" Shelia shrieked. "I don't want to become a Mead! I don't want to be somebody else!"

She ran to the inner wall of the corridor. There was a brief hesitation, and then, one by one, the women fled to that side, until there were only Bess, June and four others left.

"See!" cried Shelia. "A vote! We can't let the girl in!"

No one spoke. To change, to be someone else--the idea was strange and horrifying. The men stood uneasily glancing at each other, as if looking into mirrors, and against the wall of the corridor the women watched in fear and huddled together, staring at the men. One man in forty-seven poses. One of them made a beseeching move toward Elsie and she shrank away.

"No, Jerry! I won't let you change me!"

Max stirred restlessly, the ironic smile that made his new face his own unconsciously twisting into a grimace of pity. "We men can't leave, and you women can't stay," he said bluntly. "Why not let Patricia Mead in. Get it over with!"

June took a small mirror from her belt pouch and studied her own face, aware of Max talking forcefully, the men standing silent, the women pleading. Her face ... her own face with its dark blue eyes, small nose, long mobile lips ... the mind and the body are inseparable; the shape of a face is part of the mind. She put the mirror back.

"I'd kill myself!" Shelia was sobbing. "I'd rather die!"

"You won't die," Max was saying. "Can't you see there's only one solution--"

They were looking at Max. June stepped silently out of the tank room, and then turned and went to the airlock. She opened the valves that would let in Pat Mead's sister.

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KEEP YOUR SHAPE

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Illustrated by VIDMER

Only a race as incredibly elastic as the Grom could have a single rule of war:

* * * * *

Pid the Pilot slowed the ship almost to a standstill, and peered anxiously at the green planet below.

Even without instruments, there was no mistaking it. Third from its sun, it was the only planet in this system capable of sustaining life. Peacefully it swam beneath its gauze of clouds.

It looked very innocent. And yet, twenty previous Grom expeditions had

set out to prepare this planet for invasion--and vanished utterly, without a word.

Pid hesitated only a moment, before starting irrevocably down. There was no point in hovering and worrying. He and his two crewmen were as ready now as they would ever be. Their compact Displacers were stored in body pouches, inactive but ready.

Pid wanted to say something to his crew, but wasn't sure how to put it.

The crew waited. Ilg the Radioman had sent the final message to the Grom planet. Ger the Detector read sixteen dials at once, and reported, "No sign of alien activity." His body surfaces flowed carelessly.

* * * * *

Noticing the flow, Pid knew what to say to his crew. Ever since they had left Grom, shape-discipline had been disgustingly lax. The Invasion Chief had warned him; but still, he had to do something about it. It was his duty, since lower castes such as Radiomen and Detectors were notoriously prone to Shapelessness.

"A lot of hopes are resting on this expedition," he began slowly. "We're a long way from home now."

Ger the Detector nodded. Ilg the Radioman flowed out of his prescribed shape and molded himself comfortably to a wall.

"However," Pid said sternly, "distance is no excuse for promiscuous Shapelessness."

Ilg flowed hastily back into proper Radioman's shape.

"Exotic forms will undoubtedly be called for," Pid went on. "And for that we have a special dispensation. But remember--any shape not assumed strictly in the line of duty is a foul, lawless device of The Shapeless One!"

Ger's body surfaces abruptly stopped flowing.

"That's all," Pid said, and flowed into his controls. The ship started down, so smoothly co-ordinated that Pid felt a glow of pride.

They were good workers, he decided. He just couldn't expect them to be as shape-conscious as a high-caste Pilot. Even the Invasion Chief had told him that.

"Pid," the Invasion Chief had said at their last interview, "we need this planet desperately."

"Yes, sir," Pid had said, standing at full attention, never quivering from Optimum Pilot's Shape.

"One of you," the Chief said heavily, "must get through and set up a Displacer near an atomic power source. The army will be standing by at this end, ready to step through."

"We'll do it, sir," Pid said.

"This expedition has to succeed," the Chief said, and his features blurred momentarily from sheer fatigue. "In strictest confidence, there's considerable unrest on Grom. The Miner caste is on strike, for instance. They want a new digging shape. Say the old one is inefficient."

[Illustration]

Pid looked properly indignant. The Mining Shape had been set down by the Ancients fifty thousand years ago, together with the rest of the basic shapes. And now these upstarts wanted to change it!

"That's not all," the Chief told him. "We've uncovered a new Cult of Shapelessness. Picked up almost eight thousand Grom, and I don't know how many more we missed."

Pid knew that Shapelessness was a lure of The Shapeless One, the greatest evil that the Grom mind could conceive of. But why, he wondered, did so many Grom fall for His lures?

* * * * *

The Chief guessed his question. "Pid," he said, "I suppose it's difficult for you to understand. Do you enjoy Piloting?"

"Yes, sir," Pid said simply. _Enjoy_ Piloting! It was his entire life! Without a ship, he was nothing.

"Not all Grom feel that way," the Chief said. "I don't understand it either. All my ancestors have been Invasion Chiefs, back to the beginning of time. So of course _I_ want to be an Invasion Chief. It's only natural, as well as lawful. But the lower castes don't feel that way." The Chief shook his body sadly. "I've told you this for a reason. We Grom need more room. This unrest is caused purely by crowding. All our psychologists say so. Another planet to expand into will cure everything. So we're counting on you, Pid."

"Yes, sir," Pid said, with a glow of pride.

The Chief rose to end the interview. Then he changed his mind and sat down again.

"You'll have to watch your crew," he said. "They're loyal, no doubt, but low-caste. And you know the lower castes."

Pid did indeed.

"Ger, your Detector, is suspected of harboring Alterationist tendencies. He was once fined for assuming a quasi-Hunter shape. Ilg has never had any definite charge brought against him. But I hear that he remains immobile for suspiciously long periods of time. Possibly, he fancies himself a Thinker."

"But, sir," Pid protested. "If they are even slightly tainted with Alterationism or Shapelessness, why send them on this expedition?"

The Chief hesitated before answering. "There are plenty of Grom I

could trust," he said slowly. "But those two have certain qualities of resourcefulness and imagination that will be needed on this expedition." He sighed. "I really don't understand why those qualities are usually linked with Shapelessness."

"Yes, sir," Pid said.

"Just watch them."

"Yes, sir," Pid said again, and saluted, realizing that the interview was at an end. In his body pouch he felt the dormant Displacer, ready to transform the enemy's power source into a bridge across space for the Grom hordes.

"Good luck," the chief said. "I'm sure you'll need it."

* * * * *

The ship dropped silently toward the surface of the enemy planet. Ger the Detector analyzed the clouds below, and fed data into the Camouflage Unit. The Unit went to work. Soon the ship looked, to all outward appearances, like a cirrus formation.

Pid allowed the ship to drift slowly toward the surface of the mystery planet. He was in Optimum Pilot's Shape now, the most efficient of the four shapes allotted to the Pilot caste. Blind, deaf and dumb, an extension of his controls, all his attention was directed toward matching the velocities of the high-flying clouds, staying among them, becoming a part of them.

Ger remained rigidly in one of the two shapes allotted to Detectors. He fed data into the Camouflage Unit, and the descending ship slowly altered into an alto-cumulus.

There was no sign of activity from the enemy planet.

Ilg located an atomic power source, and fed the data to Pid. The Pilot altered course. He had reached the lowest level of clouds, barely a mile above the surface of the planet. Now his ship looked like a fat, fleecy cumulus.

And still there was no sign of alarm. The unknown fate that had overtaken twenty previous expeditions still had not showed itself.

Dusk crept across the face of the planet as Pid maneuvered near the atomic power installation. He avoided the surrounding homes and hovered over a clump of woods.

Darkness fell, and the green planet's lone moon was veiled in clouds.

One cloud floated lower.

And landed.

"Quick, everyone out!" Pid shouted, detaching himself from the ship's controls. He assumed the Pilot's Shape best suited for running, and raced out the hatch. Ger and Ilg hurried after him. They stopped fifty yards from the ship, and waited.

Inside the ship a little-used circuit closed. There was a silent shudder, and the ship began to melt. Plastic dissolved, metal crumpled. Soon the ship was a great pile of junk, and still the process went on. Big fragments broke into smaller fragments, and split, and split again.

Pid felt suddenly helpless, watching his ship scuttle itself. He was a Pilot, of the Pilot caste. His father had been a Pilot, and his father before him, stretching back to the hazy past when the Grom had first constructed ships. He had spent his entire childhood around ships, his entire manhood flying them.

Now, shipless, he was naked in an alien world.

* * * * *

In a few minutes there was only a mound of dust to show where the ship had been. The night wind scattered it through the forest. And then there was nothing at all.

They waited. Nothing happened. The wind sighed and the trees creaked. Squirrels chirped, and birds stirred in their nests. An acorn fell to the ground.

Pid heaved a sigh of relief and sat down. The twenty-first Grom expedition had landed safely.

There was nothing to be done until morning, so Pid began to make plans. They had landed as close to the atomic power installation as they dared. Now they would have to get closer. Somehow, one of them had to get very near the reactor room, in order to activate the Displacer.

Difficult. But Pid felt certain of success. After all, the Grom were strong on ingenuity.

Strong on ingenuity, he thought bitterly, but terribly short of radioactives. That was another reason why this expedition was so important. There was little radioactive fuel left, on any of the Grom worlds. Ages ago, the Grom had spent their store of radioactives in spreading throughout their neighboring worlds, occupying the ones that they could live on.

Now, colonization barely kept up with the mounting birthrate. New worlds were constantly needed.

This particular world, discovered in a scouting expedition, was needed. It suited the Grom perfectly. But it was too far away. They didn't have enough fuel to mount a conquering space fleet.

Luckily, there was another way. A better way.

Over the centuries, the Grom scientists had developed the Displacer. A triumph of Identity Engineering, the Displacer allowed mass to be moved instantaneously between any two linked points.

One end was set up at Grom's sole atomic energy plant. The other end had to be placed in proximity to another atomic power source, and activated. Diverted power then flowed through both ends, was modified,

and modified again.

Then, through the miracle of Identity Engineering, the Grom could _step_ through from planet to planet; or pour through in a great, overwhelming wave.

It was quite simple.

But twenty expeditions had failed to set up the Earth-end Displacer.

What had happened to them was not known.

For no Grom ship had ever returned to tell.

* * * * *

Before dawn they crept through the woods, taking on the coloration of the plants around them. Their Displacers pulsed feebly, sensing the nearness of atomic energy.

A tiny, four-legged creature darted in front of them. Instantly, Ger grew four legs and a long, streamlined body and gave chase.

"Ger! Come back here!" Pid howled at the Detector, throwing caution to the winds.

Ger overtook the animal and knocked it down. He tried to bite it, but he had neglected to grow teeth. The animal jumped free, and vanished into the underbrush. Ger thrust out a set of teeth and bunched his muscles for another leap.

"_Ger!_"

Reluctantly, the Detector turned away. He loped silently back to Pid.

"I was hungry," he said.

"You were not," Pid said sternly.

"Was," Ger mumbled, writhing with embarrassment.

Pid remembered what the Chief had told him. Ger certainly did have Hunter tendencies. He would have to watch him more closely.

"We'll have no more of that," Pid said. "Remember--the lure of Exotic Shapes is not sanctioned. Be content with the shape you were born to."

Ger nodded, and melted back into the underbrush. They moved on.

At the extreme edge of the woods they could observe the atomic energy installation. Pid disguised himself as a clump of shrubbery, and Ger formed himself into an old log. Ilg, after a moment's thought, became a young oak.

The installation was in the form of a long, low building, surrounded by a metal fence. There was a gate, and guards in front of it.

The first job, Pid thought, was to get past that gate. He began to consider ways and means.

From the fragmentary reports of the survey parties, Pid knew that, in some ways, this race of Men were like the Grom. They had pets, as the Grom did, and homes and children, and a culture. The inhabitants were skilled mechanically, as were the Grom.

But there were terrific differences, also. The Men were of fixed and immutable form, like stones or trees. And to compensate, their planet boasted a fantastic array of species, types and kinds. This was completely unlike Grom, which had only eight distinct forms of animal life.

And evidently, the Men were skilled at detecting invaders, Pid thought. He wished he knew how the other expeditions had failed. It would make his job much easier.

* * * * *

A Man lurched past them on two incredibly stiff legs. Rigidity was evident in his every move. Without looking, he hurried past.

"I know," Ger said, after the creature had moved away. "I'll disguise myself as a Man, walk through the gate to the reactor room, and activate my Displacer."

"You can't speak their language," Pid pointed out.

"I won't speak at all. I'll ignore them. Look." Quickly Ger shaped himself into a Man.

"That's not bad," Pid said.

Ger tried a few practice steps, copying the bumpy walk of the Man.

"But I'm afraid it won't work," Pid said.

"It's perfectly logical," Ger pointed out.

"I know. Therefore the other expeditions must have tried it. And none of them came back."

There was no arguing that. Ger flowed back into the shape of a log. "What, then?" he asked.

"Let me think," Pid said.

Another creature lurched past, on four legs instead of two. Pid recognized it as a Dog, a pet of Man. He watched it carefully.

The Dog ambled to the gate, head down, in no particular hurry. It walked through, unchallenged, and lay down in the grass.

"H'm," Pid said.

They watched. One of the Men walked past, and touched the Dog on the head. The Dog stuck out its tongue and rolled over on its side.

"I can do that," Ger said excitedly. He started to flow into the shape of a Dog.

"No, wait," Pid said. "We'll spend the rest of the day thinking it over. This is too important to rush into."

Ger subsided sulkily.

"Come on, let's move back," Pid said. He and Ger started into the woods. Then he remembered Ilg.

"Ilg?" he called softly.

There was no answer.

"Ilg!"

"What? Oh, yes," an oak tree said, and melted into a bush. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"We're moving back," Pid said. "Were you, by any chance, Thinking?"

"Oh, no," Ilg assured him. "Just resting."

Pid let it go at that. There was too much else to worry about.

* * * * *

They discussed it for the rest of the day, hidden in the deepest part of the woods. The only alternatives seemed to be Man or Dog. A Tree couldn't walk past the gates, since that was not in the nature of trees. Nor could anything else, and escape notice.

Going as a Man seemed too risky. They decided that Ger would sally out in the morning as a Dog.

"Now get some sleep," Pid said.

Obediently his two crewmen flattened out, going immediately Shapeless. But Pid had a more difficult time.

Everything looked too easy. Why wasn't the atomic installation better guarded? Certainly the Men must have learned something from the expeditions they had captured in the past. Or had they killed them without asking any questions?

You couldn't tell what an alien would do.

Was that open gate a trap?

Wearily he flowed into a comfortable position on the lumpy ground. Then he pulled himself together hastily.

He had gone Shapeless!

Comfort was not in the line of duty, he reminded himself, and firmly took a Pilot's Shape.

But a Pilot's Shape wasn't constructed for sleeping on damp, bumpy ground. Pid spent a restless night, thinking of ships, and wishing he were flying one.

He awoke in the morning tired and ill-tempered. He nudged Ger.

"Let's get this over with," he said.

Ger flowed gaily to his feet.

"Come on, Ilg," Pid said angrily, looking around. "Wake up."

There was no reply.

"Ilg!" he called.

Still there was no reply.

"Help me look for him," Pid said to Ger. "He must be around here somewhere."

Together they tested every bush, tree, log and shrub in the vicinity. But none of them was Ilg.

Pid began to feel a cold panic run through him. What could have happened to the Radioman?

"Perhaps he decided to go through the gate on his own," Ger suggested. [original: Ilg suggested (n. of transcriber)]

Pid considered the possibility. It seemed unlikely. Ilg had never shown much initiative. He had always been content to follow orders.

They waited. But midday came, and there was still no sign of Ilg.

"We can't wait any longer," Pid said, and they started through the woods. Pid wondered if Ilg _had_ tried to get through the gates on his own. Those quiet types often concealed a foolhardy streak.

But there was nothing to show that Ilg had been successful. He would have to assume that the Radioman was dead, or captured by the Men.

That left two of them to activate a Displacer.

And he still didn't know what had happened to the other expeditions.

* * * * *

At the edge of the woods, Ger turned himself into a facsimile of a Dog. Pid inspected him carefully.

"A little less tail," he said.

Ger shortened his tail.

"More ears."

Ger lengthened his ears,

"Now even them up."

They became even.

Pid inspected the finished product. As far as he could tell, Ger was perfect, from the tip of his tail to his wet, black nose.

"Good luck," Pid said.

"Thanks." Cautiously Ger moved out of the woods, walking in the lurching style of Dogs and Men. At the gate the guard called to him. Pid held his breath.

Ger walked past the Man, ignoring him. The Man started to walk over. Ger broke into a run.

Pid shaped a pair of strong legs for himself, ready to dash if Ger was caught.

But the guard turned back to his gate. Ger stopped running immediately, and strolled quietly toward the main door of the building.

Pid dissolved his legs with a sigh of relief ... and then tensed again.

The main door was closed!

Pid hoped the Radioman wouldn't try to open it. That was not in the nature of Dogs.

As he watched, another Dog came running toward Ger. Ger backed away from him. The Dog approached and sniffed. Ger sniffed back.

Then both of them ran around the building.

That was clever, Pid thought. There was bound to be a door in the rear.

He glanced up at the afternoon sun. As soon as the Displacer was activated, the Grom armies would begin to pour through. By the time the Men recovered from the shock, a million or more Grom troops would be here, weapons and all. With more following.

The day passed slowly, and nothing happened.

Nervously Pid watched the front of the plant. It shouldn't be taking so long, if Ger were successful.

Late into the night he waited. Men walked in and out of the installation, and Dogs barked around the gates. But Ger did not appear.

Ger had failed. Ilg was gone. Only he was left.

And still he didn't know what had happened.

* * * * *

By morning, Pid was in complete despair. He knew that the twenty-first Grom expedition to this planet was near the point of complete failure. Now it was all up to him.

He saw that workers were arriving in great number, rushing through the gates. He decided to take advantage of the apparent confusion, and started to shape himself into a Man.

A Dog walked past the woods where he was hiding.

"Hello," the Dog said.

It was Ger!

"What happened?" Pid asked, with a sigh of relief. "Why were you so long? Couldn't you get in?"

"I don't know," Ger said, wagging his tail. "I didn't try."

Pid was speechless.

"I went hunting," Ger said complacently. "This form is ideal for Hunting, you know. I went out the rear gate with another Dog."

"But the expedition--your duty--"

"I changed my mind," Ger told him. "You know, Pilot, I never wanted to be a Detector."

"But you were _born_ a Detector!"

"That's true," Ger said. "But it doesn't help. I always wanted to be a Hunter."

Pid shook his entire body in annoyance. "You can't," he said, very slowly, as one would explain to a Gromling. "The Hunter shape is forbidden to you."

"Not here it isn't," Ger said, still wagging his tail.

"Let's have no more of this," Pid said angrily. "Get into that installation and set up your Displacer. I'll try to overlook this heresy."

"No," Ger said. "I don't want the Grom here. They'd ruin it for the rest of us."

"He's right," a nearby oak tree said.

"Ilg!" Pid gasped. "Where are you?"

* * * * *

Branches stirred. "I'm right here," Ilg said. "I've been Thinking."

"But--your caste--"

"Pilot," Ger said sadly, "why don't you wake up? Most of the people on Grom are miserable. Only custom makes us take the caste-shape of our ancestors."

"Pilot," Ilg said, "all Grom are born Shapeless!"

"And being born Shapeless, all Grom should have Freedom of Shape," Ger said.

"Exactly," Ilg said. "But he'll never understand. Now excuse me. I want to Think." And the oak tree was silent.

Pid laughed humorlessly. "The Men will kill you off," he said. "Just as they killed off all the other expeditions."

"No one from Grom has been killed," Ger told him. "The other expeditions are right here."

"Alive?"

"Certainly. The Men don't even know we exist. That Dog I was Hunting with is a Grom from the twelfth expedition. There are hundreds of us here, Pilot. We like it."

Pid tried to absorb it all. He had always known that the lower castes were lax in caste-consciousness. But this was preposterous!

This planet's secret menace was--freedom!

"Join us, Pilot," Ger said. "We've got a paradise here. Do you know how many species there are on this planet? An uncountable number! There's a shape to suit every need!"

Pid ignored them. Traitors!

He'd do the job all by himself.

So Men were unaware of the presence of the Grom. Getting near the reactor might not be so difficult after all. The others had failed in their duty because they were of the lower castes, weak and irresponsible. Even the Pilots among them must have been secretly sympathetic to the Cult of Shapelessness the Chief had mentioned, or the alien planet could never have swayed them.

What shape to assume for his attempt?

Pid considered.

A Dog might be best. Evidently Dogs could wander pretty much where they wished. If something went wrong, Pid could change his shape to meet the occasion.

"The Supreme Council will take care of all of you," he snarled, and shaped himself into a small brown Dog. "I'm going to set up the Displacer myself."

He studied himself for a moment, bared his teeth at Ger, and loped toward the gate.

* * * * *

He loped for about ten feet and stopped in utter horror.

The smells rushed at him from all directions. Smells in a profusion

and variety he had never dreamed existed. Smells that were harsh, sweet, sharp, heavy, mysterious, overpowering. Smells that terrified. Alien and repulsive and inescapable, the odors of Earth struck him like a blow.

He curled his lips and held his breath. He ran on for a few steps, and had to breathe again. He almost choked.

He tried to remold his Dog-nostrils to be less sensitive. It didn't work. It wouldn't, so long as he kept the Dog-shape. An attempt to modify his metabolism didn't work either.

All this in the space of two or three seconds. He was rooted in his tracks, fighting the smells, wondering what to do.

Then the noises hit him.

They were a constant and staggering roar, through which every tiniest whisper of sound stood out clearly and distinct. Sounds upon sounds--more noise than he had ever heard before at one time in his life. The woods behind him had suddenly become a mad-house.

Utterly confused, he lost control and became Shapeless.

He half-ran, half-flowed into a nearby bush. There he re-Shaped, obliterating the offending Dog ears and nostrils with vicious strokes of his thoughts.

The Dog-shape was out. Absolutely. Such appalling sharpness of senses might be fine for a Hunter such as Ger--he probably gloried in them. But another moment of such impressions would have driven Pid the Pilot mad.

What now? He lay in the bush and thought about it, while gradually his mind threw off the last effects of the dizzying sensory assault.

He looked at the gate. The Men standing there evidently hadn't noticed his fiasco. They were looking in another direction.

... a Man?

Well, it was worth a try.

* * * * *

Studying the Men at the gate, Pid carefully shaped himself into a facsimile--a synthesis, actually, embodying one characteristic of that, another of this.

He emerged from the side of the bush opposite the gate, on his hands and knees. He sniffed the air, noting that the smells the Man-nostrils picked up weren't unpleasant at all. In fact, some of them were decidedly otherwise. It had just been the acuity of the Dog-nostrils, the number of smells they had detected and the near-brilliance with which they had done so, that had shocked him.

Also, the sounds weren't half so devastating. Only relatively close sounds stood out. All else was an undetailed whispering.

Evidently, Pid thought, it had been a long time since Men had been Hunters.

He tested his legs, standing up and taking a few clumsy steps. _Thud_ of foot on ground. Drag the other leg forward in a heavy arc. _Thud._ Rocking from side to side, he marched back and forth behind the bush. His arms flapped as he sought balance. His head wobbled on its neck, until he remembered to hold it up. Head up, eyes down, he missed seeing a small rock. His heel turned on it. He sat down, hard.

The ankle hurt. Pid curled his Man-lips and crawled back into the bush.

The Man-shape was too unspeakably clumsy. It was offensive to plod one step at a time. Body held rigidly upright. Arms wobbling. There had been a deluge of sense-impressions in the Dog-shape; there was dull, stiff, half-alive inadequacy to the Man-shape.

Besides, it was dangerous, now that Pid thought it over, as well as distasteful. He couldn't control it properly. It wouldn't look right. Someone might question him. There was too much about Men he didn't--couldn't--know. The planting of the Displacer was too important a thing for him to fumble again. Only luck had kept him from being seen during the sensory onslaught.

The Displacer in his body pouch pulsed and tugged, urging him to be on his way toward the distant reactor room.

Grimly, Pid let out the last breath he had taken with his Man-lungs, and dissolved the lungs.

What shape to take?

Again he studied the gate, the Men standing beside it, the building beyond in which was the all-important reactor.

A small shape was needed. A fast one. An unobtrusive one.

He lay and thought.

The bush rustled above him. A small brown shape had fluttered down to light on a twig. It hopped to another twig, twittering. Then it fluttered off in a flash, and was gone.

That, Pid thought, was it.

* * * * *

A Sparrow that was not a Sparrow rose from the bush a few moments later. An observer would have seen it circle the bush, diving, hedgehopping, even looping, as if practicing all maneuvers possible to Sparrows.

Pid tensed his shoulder muscles, inclined his wings. He slipped off to the right, approached the bush at what seemed breakneck speed, though he knew this was only because of his small size. At the last second he lifted his tail. Not quite quickly enough. He swooped up and over the top of the bush, but his legs brushed the top leaves, his beak went down, and he stumbled in air for a few feet back-forward.

He blinked beady eyes as if at a challenge. Back toward the bush at a fine clip, again up and over. This time cleanly.

He chose a tree. Zoomed into its network of branches, wove a web of flight, working his way around and around the trunk, over and under branches that flashed before him, through crotches with no more than a feather's-breath to spare.

At last he rested on a low branch, and found himself chirping in delight.

The tree extruded a feeler from the branch he sat on, and touched his wings and tail.

"Interesting," said the tree. "I'll have to try that shape some time."

Ilg.

"Traitor," hissed Pid, growing a mouth in his chest to hiss it, and then he did something that caused Ilg to exclaim in outrage.

Pid flew out of the woods. Over the underbrush and across the open space toward the gate.

This body would do the trick!

This body would do anything!

He rose, in a matter of a few Sparrow heartbeats, to an altitude of a hundred feet. From here the gate, the Men, the building were small, sharp shapes against a green-brown mat. Pid found that he could see not only with unaccustomed clarity, but with a range of vision that astonished him. To right and to left he could see far into the hazy blue of the sky, and the higher he rose the farther he could see.

He rose higher.

The Displacer pulsed, reminding him of the job he had to do.

* * * * *

He stiffened his wings and glided, regretfully putting aside his desires to experiment with this wonderful shape, at least for the present. After he planted the Displacer, he would go off by himself for a while and do it just a little more--somewhere where Ilg and Ger would not see him--before the Grom Army arrived and the invasion began.

He felt a tiny twinge of guilt, as he circled. It was Evil to want to keep this alien flying shape any longer than was absolutely necessary to the performance of his duty. It was a device of the Shapeless One--

But what had Ilg said? _All Grom are born Shapeless._ It was true. Grom children were amorphous, until old enough to be instructed in the caste-shape of their ancestors.

Maybe it wasn't _too_ great a sin to alter your Shape, then--just once in a long while. After all, one must be fully aware of the nature of

Evil in order to meaningfully reject it.

He had fallen lower in circling. The Displacer pulse had strengthened. For some reason it irritated him. He drove higher on strong wings, circled again. Air rushed past him--a smooth, whispering flow, pierced by his beak, streaming invisibly past his sharp eyes, moving along his body in tiny turbulences that moved his feathers against his skin.

It occurred to him--or rather struck him with considerable force--that he was satisfying a longing of his Pilot Caste that went far deeper than Piloting.

He drove powerfully with his wings, felt tonus across his back, shot forward and up. He thought of the controls of his ship. He imagined flowing into them, becoming part of them, as he had so often done--and for the first time in his life the thought failed to excite him.

No machine could compare with this!

What he would give to have wings of his own!

... Get from my sight, Shapeless One!

The Displacer must be planted, activated. All Grom depended on him.

He eyed the building, far below. He would pass over it. The Displacer would tell him which window to enter--which window was so near the reactor that he could do his job before the Men even knew he was about.

He started to drop lower, and the Hawk struck.

* * * * *

It had been above him. His first inkling of danger was the sharp pain of talons in his back, and the stunning blow of a beak across his head.

Dazed, he let his back go Shapeless. His body-substance flowed from the grasp of the talons. He dropped a dozen feet and resumed Sparrow-shape, hearing an astonished squawk from the attacker.

He banked, and looked up. The Hawk was eyeing him.

Talons spread again. The sharp beak gaped. The Hawk swooped.

Pid had to fight as a Bird, naturally. He was four hundred feet above the ground.

So he became an impossibly deadly Bird.

He grew to twice the size of the Hawk. He grew a foot-long beak with a double razor's edge. He grew talons like six inch scimitars. His eyes gleamed a red challenge.

The Hawk broke flight, squalling in alarm. Frantically, tail down and widespread, it thundered its wings and came to a dead stop six feet from Pid.

Looking thoughtfully at Pid, it allowed itself to plummet. It fell a hundred feet, spread its wings, stretched its neck and flew off so hastily that its wings became blurs.

Pid saw no reason to pursue it.

Then, after a moment, he did.

He glided, keeping the Hawk in sight, thoughts racing, feeling the newness, the power, the wonder of Freedom of Shape.

Freedom....

He did not want to give it up.

The bird-shape was wondrous. He would experiment with it. Later, he might tire of it for a time and assume another--a crawling or running shape, or even a swimming one. The possibilities for excitement, for adventure, for fulfilment and simple sensual pleasure were endless!

Freedom of Shape was--obviously, now that you thought on it--the Grom birthright. And the caste-system was artificial--obviously. A device for political and priestly benefit--obviously.

Go away, Shapeless One ... this does not concern you.

He rose to a thousand feet, two thousand, three. The Displacer's pulse grew feebler and finally vanished.

At four thousand feet he released it and watched it spin downward, vanish into a cloud.

Then he set out after the Hawk, which was now only a dot on the horizon. He would find out how the Hawk had broken flight as it had--skidded on air--he wanted to do that too! There were so many things he wanted to learn about flying. In a week, he thought, he should be able to duplicate all the skill that millennia had evolved into Birds. Then his new life would really begin.

He became a torpedo-shape with huge wings, and sped after the Hawk.

ROBERT SHECKLEY

* * * * *

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PROJECT HUSH

By WILLIAM TENN

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

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The biggest job in history and it had to be done with complete secrecy. It was—which was just the trouble! I guess I'm just a stickler, a perfectionist, but if you do a thing, I always say, you might as well do it right. Everything satisfied me about the security measures on our assignment except one—the official Army designation.

I don't know who thought it up, and I certainly would never ask, but whoever it was, he should have known better. Damn it, when you want a project kept secret, you don't give it a designation like that! You give it something neutral, some name like the Manhattan and Overlord they used in World War II, which won't excite anybody's curiosity.

But we were stuck with Project Hush and we had to take extra measures to ensure secrecy. A couple of times a week, everyone on the project had to report to Psycho for DD & HA—dream detailing and hypnoanalysis—instead of the usual monthly visit. Naturally, the commanding general of the heavily fortified research post to which we were attached could not ask what we were doing, under penalty of court-martial, but he had to be given further instructions to shut off his imagination like a faucet every time he heard an explosion. Some idiot in Washington was actually going to list Project Hush in the military budget by name! It took fast action, I can tell

you, to have it entered under Miscellaneous "X" Research.

Well, we'd covered the unforgivable blunder, though not easily, and now we could get down to the real business of the project. You know, of course, about the A-bomb, H-bomb and C-bomb because information that they existed had been declassified. You don't know about the other weapons being devised—and neither did we, reasonably enough, since they weren't our business—but we had been given properly guarded notification that they were in the works. Project Hush was set up to counter the new weapons.

Our goal was not just to reach the Moon. We had done that on 24 June 1967 with an unmanned ship that carried instruments to report back data on soil, temperature, cosmic rays and so on. Unfortunately, it was put out of commission by a rock slide.

An unmanned rocket would be useless against the new weapons. We had to get to the Moon before any other country did and set up a permanent station—an armed one—and do it without anybody else knowing about it.

I guess you see now why we on (damn the name!) Project Hush were so concerned about security. But we felt pretty sure, before we took off, that we had plugged every possible leak.

We had, all right. Nobody even knew we had raised ship.

We landed at the northern tip of Mare Nubium, just off Regiomontanus, and, after planting a flag with appropriate throat-catching ceremony, had swung into the realities of the tasks we had practiced on so many dry runs back on Earth. Major Monroe Gridley prepared the big rocket, with its tiny cubicle of living space, for the return journey to Earth which he alone would make.

Lieutenant-colonel Thomas Hawthorne painstakingly examined our provisions and portable quarters for any damage that might have been incurred in landing.

And I, Colonel Benjamin Rice, first commanding officer of Army Base No. 1 on the Moon, dragged crate after enormous crate out of the ship on my aching academic back, and piled them in the spot two hundred feet away where the plastic dome would be built.

We all finished at just about the same time, as per schedule, and went into Phase Two.

Monroe and I started work on building the dome. It was a simple pre-fab affair, but big enough to require an awful lot of assembling. Then, after it was built, we faced the real problem—getting all the complex internal machinery in place and in operating order.

Meanwhile, Tom Hawthorne took his plump self off in the single-seater rocket which, up to then, had doubled as a lifeboat.

The schedule called for him to make a rough three-hour scouting survey in an ever-widening spiral from our dome. This had been regarded as a probable waste of time, rocket fuel and manpower—but a necessary precaution. He was supposed to watch for such things as bug-eyed monsters out for a stroll on the Lunar landscape. Basically, however, Tom's survey was intended to supply extra geological and astronomical meat for the report which Monroe was to carry back to Army HQ on Earth.

Tom was back in forty minutes. His round face, inside its transparent bubble helmet, was fish-belly white. And so were ours, once he told us what he'd seen.

He had seen another dome.

"The other side of Mare Nubium—in the Riphaen Mountains," he babbled excitedly. "It's a little bigger than ours, and it's a little flatter on top. And it's not translucent, either, with splotches of different colors here and there—it's a dull, dark, heavy gray. But that's all there is to see."

"No markings on the dome?" I asked worriedly. "No signs of anyone—or anything—around it?"

"Neither, Colonel." I noticed he was calling me by my rank for the first time since the trip started, which meant he

was saying in effect, "Man, have you got a decision to make!"

"Hey, Tom," Monroe put in. "Couldn't be just a regularly shaped bump in the ground, could it?"

"I'm a geologist, Monroe. I can distinguish artificial from natural topography. Besides—" he looked up—"I just remembered something I left out. There's a brand-new tiny crater near the dome—the kind usually left by a rocket exhaust."

"Rocket exhaust?" I seized on that. "Rockets, eh?"

Tom grinned a little sympathetically. "Spaceship exhaust, I should have said. You can't tell from the crater what kind of propulsive device these characters are using. It's not the same kind of crater our rear-jets leave, if that helps any."

Of course it didn't. So we went into our ship and had a council of war. And I do mean war. Both Tom and Monroe were calling me Colonel in every other sentence. I used their first names every chance I got.

Still, no one but me could reach a decision. About what to do, I mean.

"Look," I said at last, "here are the possibilities. They know we are here—either from watching us land a couple of hours ago or from observing Tom's scout-ship—or they do not know we are here. They are either humans from Earth—in which case they are in all probability enemy nationals—or they are alien creatures from another planet—in which case they may be friends, enemies or what-have-you. I think common sense and standard military procedure demand that we consider them hostile until we have evidence to the contrary. Meanwhile, we proceed with extreme caution, so as not to precipitate an interplanetary war with potentially friendly Martians, or whatever they are.

"All right. It's vitally important that Army Headquarters be informed of this immediately. But since Moon-to-Earth radio is still on the drawing boards, the only way we can get through is to send Monroe back with the ship. If we do, we run the risk of having our garrison force, Tom and me, captured while he's making the return trip. In that case, their side winds up in possession of important information concerning our personnel and equipment, while our side has only the bare knowledge that somebody or something else has a base on the Moon. So our primary need is more information.

"Therefore, I suggest that I sit in the dome on one end of a telephone hookup with Tom, who will sit in the ship, his hand over the firing button, ready to blast off for Earth the moment he gets the order from me. Monroe will take the single-seater down to the Riphaen Mountains, landing as close to the other dome as he thinks safe. He will then proceed the rest of the way on foot, doing the best scouting job he can in a spacesuit.

"He will not use his radio, except for agreed-upon nonsense syllables to designate landing the single-seater, coming upon the dome by foot, and warning me to tell Tom to take off. If he's captured, remembering that the first purpose of a scout is acquiring and transmitting knowledge of the enemy, he will snap his suit radio on full volume and pass on as much data as time and the enemy's reflexes permit. How does that sound to you?"

They both nodded. As far as they were concerned, the command decision had been made. But I was sitting under two inches of sweat.

"One question," Tom said. "Why did you pick Monroe for the scout?"

"I was afraid you'd ask that," I told him. "We're three extremely unathletic Ph.D.s who have been in the Army since we finished our schooling. There isn't too much choice. But I remembered that Monroe is half Indian—Arapahoe, isn't it, Monroe?—and I'm hoping blood will tell."

"Only trouble, Colonel," Monroe said slowly as he rose, "is that I'm one-fourth Indian and even that.... Didn't I ever tell you that my great-grandfather was the only Arapahoe scout who was with Custer at the Little Big Horn? He'd been positive Sitting Bull was miles away. However, I'll do my best. And if I heroically don't come back, would you please persuade the Security Officer of our section to clear my name for use in the history books? Under the circumstances, I think it's the least he could do."

I promised to do my best, of course.

After he took off, I sat in the dome over the telephone connection to Tom and hated myself for picking Monroe to do the job. But I'd have hated myself just as much for picking Tom. And if anything happened and I had to tell Tom to blast off, I'd probably be sitting here in the dome all by myself after that, waiting....

"Broz neggle!" came over the radio in Monroe's resonant voice. He had landed the single-seater.

I didn't dare use the telephone to chat with Tom in the ship, for fear I might miss an important word or phrase from our scout. So I sat and sat and strained my ears. After a while, I heard "Mishgashu!" which told me that Monroe was in the neighborhood of the other dome and was creeping toward it under cover of whatever boulders were around.

And then, abruptly, I heard Monroe yell my name and there was a terrific clattering in my headphones. Radio interference! He'd been caught, and whoever had caught him had simultaneously jammed his suit transmitter with a larger transmitter from the alien dome.

Then there was silence.

After a while, I told Tom what had happened. He just said, "Poor Monroe." I had a good idea of what his expression was like.

"Look, Tom," I said, "if you take off now, you still won't have anything important to tell. After capturing Monroe, whatever's in that other dome will come looking for us, I think. I'll let them get close enough for us to learn something of their appearance—at least if they're human or non-human. Any bit of information about them is important. I'll shout it up to you and you'll still be able to take off in plenty of time. All right?"

"You're the boss, Colonel," he said in a mournful voice. "Lots of luck."

And then there was nothing to do but wait. There was no oxygen system in the dome yet, so I had to squeeze up a sandwich from the food compartment in my suit. I sat there, thinking about the expedition. Nine years, and all that careful secrecy, all that expenditure of money and mind-cracking research—and it had come to this. Waiting to be wiped out, in a blast from some unimaginable weapon. I understood Monroe's last request. We often felt we were so secret that our immediate superiors didn't even want us to know what we were working on. Scientists are people—they wish for recognition, too. I was hoping the whole expedition would be written up in the history books, but it looked unpromising.

Two hours later, the scout ship landed near the dome. The lock opened and, from where I stood in the open door of our dome, I saw Monroe come out and walk toward me.

I alerted Tom and told him to listen carefully. "It may be a trick—he might be drugged...."

He didn't act drugged, though—not exactly. He pushed his way past me and sat down on a box to one side of the dome. He put his booted feet up on another, smaller box.

"How are you, Ben?" he asked. "How's every little thing?"

I grunted. "Well?" I know my voice skittered a bit.

He pretended puzzlement. "Well what? Oh, I see what you mean. The other dome—you want to know who's in it. You have a right to be curious, Ben. Certainly. The leader of a top-secret expedition like this—Project Hush they call us, huh, Ben—finds another dome on the Moon. He thinks he's been the first to land on it, so naturally he wants to—"

"Major Monroe Gridley!" I rapped out. "You will come to attention and deliver your report. Now!" Honestly, I felt my neck swelling up inside my helmet.

Monroe just leaned back against the side of the dome. "That's the Army way of doing things," he commented

admiringly. "Like the recruits say, there's a right way, a wrong way and an Army way. Only there are other ways, too." He chuckled. "Lots of other ways."

"He's off," I heard Tom whisper over the telephone. "Ben, Monroe has gone and blown his stack."

"They aren't extraterrestrials in the other dome, Ben," Monroe volunteered in a sudden burst of sanity. "No, they're human, all right, and from Earth. Guess where."

"I'll kill you," I warned him. "I swear I'll kill you, Monroe. Where are they from—Russia, China, Argentina?"

He grimaced. "What's so secret about those places? Go on!—guess again."

I stared at him long and hard. "The only place else—"

"Sure," he said. "You got it, Colonel. The other dome is owned and operated by the Navy. The goddam United States Navy!"

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MOON IS GREEN ***

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THE MOON
IS GREEN
By FRITZ LEIBER

Anybody who wanted to escape death could, by paying a very simple price—denial of life!

"Effie! What the devil are you up to?"

Her husband's voice, chopping through her mood of terrified rapture, made her heart jump like a startled cat, yet by some miracle of feminine self-control her body did not show a tremor.

Dear God, she thought, he mustn't see it. It's so beautiful, and he always kills beauty.

"I'm just looking at the Moon," she said listlessly. "It's green."

Mustn't, mustn't see it. And now, with luck, he wouldn't. For the face, as if it also heard and sensed the menace in the voice, was moving back from the window's glow into the outside dark, but slowly, reluctantly, and still faunlike, pleading, cajoling, tempting, and incredibly beautiful.

"Close the shutters at once, you little fool, and come away from the window!"

"Green as a beer bottle," she went on dreamily, "green as emeralds, green as leaves with sunshine striking through them and green grass to lie on." She couldn't help saying those last words. They were her token to the face, even though it couldn't hear.

"Effie!"

She knew what that last tone meant. Wearily she swung shut the ponderous lead inner shutters and drove home the heavy bolts. That hurt her fingers; it always did, but he mustn't know that.

"You know that those shutters are not to be touched! Not for five more years at least!"

"I only wanted to look at the Moon," she said, turning around, and then it was all gone—the face, the night, the Moon, the magic—and she was back in the grubby, stale little hole, facing an angry, stale little man. It was then that the eternal thud of the air-conditioning fans and the crackle of the electrostatic precipitators that sieved out the dust reached her consciousness again like the bite of a dentist's drill.

"Only wanted to look at the Moon!" he mimicked her in falsetto. "Only wanted to die like a little fool and make me that much more ashamed of you!" Then his voice went gruff and professional. "Here, count yourself."

She silently took the Geiger counter he held at arm's length, waited until it settled down to a steady ticking slower than a clock—due only to cosmic rays and indicating nothing dangerous—and then began to comb her body with the instrument. First her head and shoulders, then out along her arms and back along their under side. There was something oddly voluptuous about her movements, although her features were gray and sagging.

The ticking did not change its tempo until she came to her waist. Then it suddenly spurted, clicking faster and faster. Her husband gave an excited grunt, took a quick step forward, froze. She goggled for a moment in fear, then grinned foolishly, dug in the pocket of her grimy apron and guiltily pulled out a wristwatch.

He grabbed it as it dangled from her fingers, saw that it had a radium dial, cursed, heaved it up as if to smash it on the floor, but instead put it carefully on the table.

"You imbecile, you incredible imbecile," he softly chanted to himself through clenched teeth, with eyes half closed.

She shrugged faintly, put the Geiger counter on the table, and stood there slumped.

He waited until the chanting had soothed his anger, before speaking again. He said quietly, "I do suppose you still realize the sort of world you're living in?"

She nodded slowly, staring at nothingness. Oh, she realized, all right, realized only too well. It was the world that hadn't realized. The world that had gone on stockpiling hydrogen bombs. The world that had put those bombs in cobalt shells, although it had promised it wouldn't, because the cobalt made them much more terrible and cost no more. The world that had started throwing those bombs, always telling itself that it hadn't thrown enough of them yet to make the air really dangerous with the deadly radioactive dust that came from the cobalt. Thrown them and kept on throwing until the danger point, where air and ground would become fatal to all human life, was approached.

Then, for about a month, the two great enemy groups had hesitated. And then each, unknown to the other, had decided it could risk one last gigantic and decisive attack without exceeding the danger point. It had been planned to strip off the cobalt cases, but someone forgot and then there wasn't time. Besides, the military scientists of each group were confident that the lands of the other had got the most dust. The two attacks came within an hour of each other.

After that, the Fury. The Fury of doomed men who think only of taking with them as many as possible of the enemy, and in this case—they hoped—all. The Fury of suicides who know they have botched up life for good. The Fury of cocksure men who realize they have been outsmarted by fate, the enemy, and themselves, and know that they will never be able to improvise a defense when arraigned before the high court of history—and whose unadmitted hope is that there will be no high court of history left to arraign them. More cobalt bombs were dropped during the Fury than in all the preceding years of the war.

After the Fury, the Terror. Men and women with death sifting into their bones through their nostrils and skin, fighting for bare survival under a dust-hazed sky that played fantastic tricks with the light of Sun and Moon, like the dust from Krakatoa that drifted around the world for years. Cities, countryside, and air were alike poisoned, alive with deadly radiation.

The only realistic chance for continued existence was to retire, for the five or ten years the radiation would remain deadly, to some well-sealed and radiation-shielded place that must also be copiously supplied with food, water, power, and a means of air-conditioning.

Such places were prepared by the far-seeing, seized by the stronger, defended by them in turn against the desperate hordes of the dying ... until there were no more of those.

After that, only the waiting, the enduring. A mole's existence, without beauty or tenderness, but with fear and guilt as constant companions. Never to see the Sun, to walk among the trees—or even know if there were still trees.

Oh, yes, she realized what the world was like.

"You understand, too, I suppose, that we were allowed to reclaim this ground-level apartment only because the Committee believed us to be responsible people, and because I've been making a damn good showing lately?"

"Yes, Hank."

"I thought you were eager for privacy. You want to go back to the basement tenements?"

God, no! Anything rather than that fetid huddling, that shameless communal sprawl. And yet, was this so much better? The nearness to the surface was meaningless; it only tantalized. And the privacy magnified Hank.

She shook her head dutifully and said, "No, Hank."

"Then why aren't you careful? I've told you a million times, Effie, that glass is no protection against the dust that's outside that window. The lead shutter must never be touched! If you make one single slip like that and it gets around, the Committee will send us back to the lower levels without blinking an eye. And they'll think twice before trusting me with any important jobs."

"I'm sorry, Hank."

"Sorry? What's the good of being sorry? The only thing that counts is never to make a slip! Why the devil do you do such things, Effie? What drives you to it?"

She swallowed. "It's just that it's so dreadful being cooped up like this," she said hesitatingly, "shut away from the sky and the Sun. I'm just hungry for a little beauty."

"And do you suppose I'm not?" he demanded. "Don't you suppose I want to get outside, too, and be carefree and have a good time? But I'm not so damn selfish about it. I want my children to enjoy the Sun, and my children's children. Don't you see that that's the all-important thing and that we have to behave like mature adults and make sacrifices for it?"

"Yes, Hank."

He surveyed her slumped figure, her lined and listless face. "You're a fine one to talk about hunger for beauty," he told her. Then his voice grew softer, more deliberate. "You haven't forgotten, have you, Effie, that until last month the Committee was so concerned about your sterility? That they were about to enter my name on the list of those waiting to be allotted a free woman? Very high on the list, too!"

She could nod even at that one, but not while looking at him. She turned away. She knew very well that the Committee was justified in worrying about the birth rate. When the community finally moved back to the surface again, each additional healthy young person would be an asset, not only in the struggle for bare survival, but in the resumed war against Communism which some of the Committee members still counted on.

It was natural that they should view a sterile woman with disfavor, and not only because of the waste of her husband's germ-plasm, but because sterility might indicate that she had suffered more than the average from radiation. In that case, if she did bear children later on, they would be more apt to carry a defective heredity,

producing an undue number of monsters and freaks in future generations, and so contaminating the race.

Of course she understood it. She could hardly remember the time when she didn't. Years ago? Centuries? There wasn't much difference in a place where time was endless.

His lecture finished, her husband smiled and grew almost cheerful.

"Now that you're going to have a child, that's all in the background again. Do you know, Effie, that when I first came in, I had some very good news for you? I'm to become a member of the Junior Committee and the announcement will be made at the banquet tonight." He cut short her mumbled congratulations. "So brighten yourself up and put on your best dress. I want the other Juniors to see what a handsome wife the new member has got." He paused. "Well, get a move on!"

She spoke with difficulty, still not looking at him. "I'm terribly sorry, Hank, but you'll have to go alone. I'm not well."

He straightened up with an indignant jerk. "There you go again! First that infantile, inexcusable business of the shutters, and now this! No feeling for my reputation at all. Don't be ridiculous, Effie. You're coming!"

"Terribly sorry," she repeated blindly, "but I really can't. I'd just be sick. I wouldn't make you proud of me at all."

"Of course you won't," he retorted sharply. "As it is, I have to spend half my energy running around making excuses for you—why you're so odd, why you always seem to be ailing, why you're always stupid and snobbish and say the wrong thing. But tonight's really important, Effie. It will cause a lot of bad comment if the new member's wife isn't present. You know how just a hint of sickness starts the old radiation-disease rumor going. You've got to come, Effie."

She shook her head helplessly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, come on!" he shouted, advancing on her. "This is just a silly mood. As soon as you get going, you'll snap out of it. There's nothing really wrong with you at all."

He put his hand on her shoulder to turn her around, and at his touch her face suddenly grew so desperate and gray that for a moment he was alarmed in spite of himself.

"Really?" he asked, almost with a note of concern.

She nodded miserably.

"Hmm!" He stepped back and strode about irresolutely. "Well, of course, if that's the way it is ..." He checked himself and a sad smile crossed his face. "So you don't care enough about your old husband's success to make one supreme effort in spite of feeling bad?"

Again the helpless headshake. "I just can't go out tonight, under any circumstances." And her gaze stole toward the lead shutters.

He was about to say something when he caught the direction of her gaze. His eyebrows jumped. For seconds he stared at her incredulously, as if some completely new and almost unbelievable possibility had popped into his mind. The look of incredulity slowly faded, to be replaced by a harder, more calculating expression. But when he spoke again, his voice was shockingly bright and kind.

"Well, it can't be helped naturally, and I certainly wouldn't want you to go if you weren't able to enjoy it. So you hop right into bed and get a good rest. I'll run over to the men's dorm to freshen up. No, really, I don't want you to have to make any effort at all. Incidentally, Jim Barnes isn't going to be able to come to the banquet either—touch of the old 'flu, he tells me, of all things."

He watched her closely as he mentioned the other man's name, but she didn't react noticeably. In fact, she hardly seemed to be hearing his chatter.

"I got a bit sharp with you, I'm afraid, Effie," he continued contritely. "I'm sorry about that. I was excited about my new job and I guess that was why things upset me. Made me feel let down when I found you weren't feeling as good as I was. Selfish of me. Now you get into bed right away and get well. Don't worry about me a bit. I know you'd come if you possibly could. And I know you'll be thinking about me. Well, I must be off now."

He started toward her, as if to embrace her, then seemed to think better of it. He turned back at the doorway and said, emphasizing the words, "You'll be completely alone for the next four hours." He waited for her nod, then bounced out.

She stood still until his footsteps died away. Then she straightened up, walked over to where he'd put down the wristwatch, picked it up and smashed it hard on the floor. The crystal shattered, the case flew apart, and something went zing!

She stood there breathing heavily. Slowly her sagged features lifted, formed themselves into the beginning of a smile. She stole another look at the shutters. The smile became more definite. She felt her hair, wet her fingers and ran them along her hairline and back over her ears. After wiping her hands on her apron, she took it off. She straightened her dress, lifted her head with a little flourish, and stepped smartly toward the window.

Then her face went miserable again and her steps slowed.

No, it couldn't be, and it won't be, she told herself. It had been just an illusion, a silly romantic dream that she had somehow projected out of her beauty-starved mind and given a moment's false reality. There couldn't be anything alive outside. There hadn't been for two whole years.

And if there conceivably were, it would be something altogether horrible. She remembered some of the pariahs—hairless, witless creatures, with radiation welts crawling over their bodies like worms, who had come begging for succor during the last months of the Terror—and been shot down. How they must have hated the people in refuges!

But even as she was thinking these things, her fingers were caressing the bolts, gingerly drawing them, and she was opening the shutters gently, apprehensively.

No, there couldn't be anything outside, she assured herself wryly, peering out into the green night. Even her fears had been groundless.

But the face came floating up toward the window. She started back in terror, then checked herself.

For the face wasn't horrible at all, only very thin, with full lips and large eyes and a thin proud nose like the jutting beak of a bird. And no radiation welts or scars marred the skin, olive in the tempered moonlight. It looked, in fact, just as it had when she had seen it the first time.

For a long moment the face stared deep, deep into her brain. Then the full lips smiled and a half-clenched, thin-fingered hand materialized itself from the green darkness and rapped twice on the grimy pane.

Her heart pounding, she furiously worked the little crank that opened the window. It came unstuck from the frame with a tiny explosion of dust and a zing like that of the watch, only louder. A moment later it swung open wide and a puff of incredibly fresh air caressed her face and the inside of her nostrils, stinging her eyes with unanticipated tears.

The man outside balanced on the sill, crouching like a faun, head high, one elbow on knee. He was dressed in scarred, snug trousers and an old sweater.

"Is it tears I get for a welcome?" he mocked her gently in a musical voice. "Or are those only to greet God's own breath, the air?"

He swung down inside and now she could see he was tall. Turning, he snapped his fingers and called, "Come, puss."

A black cat with a twisted stump of a tail and feet like small boxing gloves and ears almost as big as rabbits'

hopped clumsily in view. He lifted it down, gave it a pat. Then, nodding familiarly to Effie, he unstrapped a little pack from his back and laid it on the table.

She couldn't move. She even found it hard to breathe.

"The window," she finally managed to get out.

He looked at her inquiringly, caught the direction of her stabbing finger. Moving without haste, he went over and closed it carelessly.

"The shutters, too," she told him, but he ignored that, looking around.

"It's a snug enough place you and your man have," he commented. "Or is it that this is a free-love town or a harem spot, or just a military post?" He checked her before she could answer. "But let's not be talking about such things now. Soon enough I'll be scared to death for both of us. Best enjoy the kick of meeting, which is always good for twenty minutes at the least." He smiled at her rather shyly. "Have you food? Good, then bring it."

She set cold meat and some precious canned bread before him and had water heating for coffee. Before he fell to, he shredded a chunk of meat and put it on the floor for the cat, which left off its sniffing inspection of the walls and ran up eagerly mewing. Then the man began to eat, chewing each mouthful slowly and appreciatively.

From across the table Effie watched him, drinking in his every deft movement, his every cryptic quirk of expression. She attended to making the coffee, but that took only a moment. Finally she could contain herself no longer.

"What's it like up there?" she asked breathlessly. "Outside, I mean."

He looked at her oddly for quite a space. Finally, he said flatly, "Oh, it's a wonderland for sure, more amazing than you tombed folk could ever imagine. A veritable fairyland." And he quickly went on eating.

"No, but really," she pressed.

Noting her eagerness, he smiled and his eyes filled with playful tenderness. "I mean it, on my oath," he assured her. "You think the bombs and the dust made only death and ugliness. That was true at first. But then, just as the doctors foretold, they changed the life in the seeds and loins that were brave enough to stay. Wonders bloomed and walked." He broke off suddenly and asked, "Do any of you ever venture outside?"

"A few of the men are allowed to," she told him, "for short trips in special protective suits, to hunt for canned food and fuels and batteries and things like that."

"Aye, and those blind-souled slugs would never see anything but what they're looking for," he said, nodding bitterly. "They'd never see the garden where a dozen buds blossom where one did before, and the flowers have petals a yard across, with stingless bees big as sparrows gently supping their nectar. Housecats grown spotted and huge as leopards (not little runts like Joe Louis here) stalk through those gardens. But they're gentle beasts, no more harmful than the rainbow-scaled snakes that glide around their paws, for the dust burned all the murder out of them, as it burned itself out.

"I've even made up a little poem about that. It starts, 'Fire can hurt me, or water, or the weight of Earth. But the dust is my friend.' Oh, yes, and then the robins like cockatoos and squirrels like a princess's ermine! All under a treasure chest of Sun and Moon and stars that the dust's magic powder changes from ruby to emerald and sapphire and amethyst and back again. Oh, and then the new children—"

"You're telling the truth?" she interrupted him, her eyes brimming with tears. "You're not making it up?"

"I am not," he assured her solemnly. "And if you could catch a glimpse of one of the new children, you'd never doubt me again. They have long limbs as brown as this coffee would be if it had lots of fresh cream in it, and smiling delicate faces and the whitish teeth and the finest hair. They're so nimble that I—a sprightly man and somewhat enlivened by the dust—feel like a cripple beside them. And their thoughts dance like flames and make me feel a very imbecile.

"Of course, they have seven fingers on each hand and eight toes on each foot, but they're the more beautiful for that. They have large pointed ears that the Sun shines through. They play in the garden, all day long, slipping among the great leaves and blooms, but they're so swift that you can hardly see them, unless one chooses to stand still and look at you. For that matter, you have to look a bit hard for all these things I'm telling you."

"But it is true?" she pleaded.

"Every word of it," he said, looking straight into her eyes. He put down his knife and fork. "What's your name?" he asked softly. "Mine's Patrick."

"Effie," she told him.

He shook his head. "That can't be," he said. Then his face brightened. "Euphemia," he exclaimed. "That's what Effie is short for. Your name is Euphemia." As he said that, looking at her, she suddenly felt beautiful. He got up and came around the table and stretched out his hand toward her.

"Euphemia—" he began.

"Yes?" she answered huskily, shrinking from him a little, but looking up sideways, and very flushed.

"Don't either of you move," Hank said.

The voice was flat and nasal because Hank was wearing a nose respirator that was just long enough to suggest an elephant's trunk. In his right hand was a large blue-black automatic pistol.

They turned their faces to him. Patrick's was abruptly alert, shifty. But Effie's was still smiling tenderly, as if Hank could not break the spell of the magic garden and should be pitied for not knowing about it.

"You little—" Hank began with an almost gleeful fury, calling her several shameful names. He spoke in short phrases, closing tight his unmasked mouth between them while he sucked in breath through the respirator. His voice rose in a crescendo. "And not with a man of the community, but a pariah! A pariah!"

"I hardly know what you're thinking, man, but you're quite wrong," Patrick took the opportunity to put in hurriedly, conciliatingly. "I just happened to be coming by hungry tonight, a lonely tramp, and knocked at the window. Your wife was a bit foolish and let kindheartedness get the better of prudence—"

"Don't think you've pulled the wool over my eyes, Effie," Hank went on with a screechy laugh, disregarding the other man completely. "Don't think I don't know why you're suddenly going to have a child after four long years."

At that moment the cat came nosing up to his feet. Patrick watched him narrowly, shifting his weight forward a little, but Hank only kicked the animal aside without taking his eyes off them.

"Even that business of carrying the wristwatch in your pocket instead of on your arm," he went on with channeled hysteria. "A neat bit of camouflage, Effie. Very neat. And telling me it was my child, when all the while you've been seeing him for months!"

"Man, you're mad; I've not touched her!" Patrick denied hotly though still calculatingly, and risked a step forward, stopping when the gun instantly swung his way.

"Pretending you were going to give me a healthy child," Hank raved on, "when all the while you knew it would be—either in body or germ plasm—a thing like that!"

He waved his gun at the malformed cat, which had leaped to the top of the table and was eating the remains of Patrick's food, though its watchful green eyes were fixed on Hank.

"I should shoot him down!" Hank yelled, between sobbing, chest-racking inhalations through the mask. "I should kill him this instant for the contaminated pariah he is!"

All this while Effie had not ceased to smile compassionately. Now she stood up without haste and went to Patrick's side. Disregarding his warning, apprehensive glance, she put her arm lightly around him and faced her husband.

"Then you'd be killing the bringer of the best news we've ever had," she said, and her voice was like a flood of some warm sweet liquor in that musty, hate-charged room. "Oh, Hank, forget your silly, wrong jealousy and listen to me. Patrick here has something wonderful to tell us."

Hank stared at her. For once he screamed no reply. It was obvious that he was seeing for the first time how beautiful she had become, and that the realization jolted him terribly.

"What do you mean?" he finally asked unevenly, almost fearfully.

"I mean that we no longer need to fear the dust," she said, and now her smile was radiant. "It never really did hurt people the way the doctors said it would. Remember how it was with me, Hank, the exposure I had and recovered from, although the doctors said I wouldn't at first—and without even losing my hair? Hank, those who were brave enough to stay outside, and who weren't killed by terror and suggestion and panic—they adapted to the dust. They changed, but they changed for the better. Everything—"

"Effie, he told you lies!" Hank interrupted, but still in that same agitated, broken voice, cowed by her beauty.

"Everything that grew or moved was purified," she went on ringingly. "You men going outside have never seen it, because you've never had eyes for it. You've been blinded to beauty, to life itself. And now all the power in the dust has gone and faded, anyway, burned itself out. That's true, isn't it?"

She smiled at Patrick for confirmation. His face was strangely veiled, as if he were calculating obscure changes. He might have given a little nod; at any rate, Effie assumed that he did, for she turned back to her husband.

"You see, Hank? We can all go out now. We need never fear the dust again. Patrick is a living proof of that," she continued triumphantly, standing straighter, holding him a little tighter. "Look at him. Not a scar or a sign, and he's been out in the dust for years. How could he be this way, if the dust hurt the brave? Oh, believe me, Hank! Believe what you see. Test it if you want. Test Patrick here."

"Effie, you're all mixed up. You don't know—" Hank faltered, but without conviction of any sort.

"Just test him," Effie repeated with utter confidence, ignoring—not even noticing—Patrick's warning nudge.

"All right," Hank mumbled. He looked at the stranger dully. "Can you count?" he asked.

Patrick's face was a complete enigma. Then he suddenly spoke, and his voice was like a fencer's foil—light, bright, alert, constantly playing, yet utterly on guard.

"Can I count? Do you take me for a complete simpleton, man? Of course I can count!"

"Then count yourself," Hank said, barely indicating the table.

"Count myself, should I?" the other retorted with a quick facetious laugh. "Is this a kindergarten? But if you want me to, I'm willing." His voice was rapid. "I've two arms, and two legs, that's four. And ten fingers and ten toes—you'll take my word for them?—that's twenty-four. A head, twenty-five. And two eyes and a nose and a mouth—"

"With this, I mean," Hank said heavily, advanced to the table, picked up the Geiger counter, switched it on, and handed it across the table to the other man.

But while it was still an arm's length from Patrick, the clicks began to mount furiously, until they were like the chatter of a pigmy machine gun. Abruptly the clicks slowed, but that was only the counter shifting to a new scaling circuit, in which each click stood for 512 of the old ones.

With those horrid, rattling little volleys, fear cascaded into the room and filled it, smashing like so much colored glass all the bright barriers of words Effie had raised against it. For no dreams can stand against the Geiger

counter, the Twentieth Century's mouthpiece of ultimate truth. It was as if the dust and all the terrors of the dust had incarnated themselves in one dread invading shape that said in words stronger than audible speech, "Those were illusions, whistles in the dark. This is reality, the dreary, pitiless reality of the Burrowing Years."

Hank scuttled back to the wall. Through chattering teeth he babbled, "... enough radioactives ... kill a thousand men ... freak ... a freak ..." In his agitation he forgot for a moment to inhale through the respirator.

Even Effie—taken off guard, all the fears that had been drilled into her twanging like piano wires—shrank from the skeletal-seeming shape beside her, held herself to it only by desperation.

Patrick did it for her. He disengaged her arm and stepped briskly away. Then he whirled on them, smiling sardonically, and started to speak, but instead looked with distaste at the chattering Geiger counter he held between fingers and thumb.

"Have we listened to this racket long enough?" he asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he put down the instrument on the table. The cat hurried over to it curiously and the clicks began again to mount in a minor crescendo. Effie lunged for it frantically, switched it off, darted back.

"That's right," Patrick said with another chilling smile. "You do well to cringe, for I'm death itself. Even in death I could kill you, like a snake." And with that his voice took on the tones of a circus barker. "Yes, I'm a freak, as the gentleman so wisely said. That's what one doctor who dared talk with me for a minute told me before he kicked me out. He couldn't tell me why, but somehow the dust doesn't kill me. Because I'm a freak, you see, just like the men who ate nails and walked on fire and ate arsenic and stuck themselves through with pins. Step right up, ladies and gentlemen—only not too close!—and examine the man the dust can't harm. Rappaccini's child, brought up to date; his embrace, death!

"And now," he said, breathing heavily, "I'll get out and leave you in your damned lead cave."

He started toward the window. Hank's gun followed him shakingly.

"Wait!" Effie called in an agonized voice. He obeyed. She continued falteringly, "When we were together earlier, you didn't act as if ..."

"When we were together earlier, I wanted what I wanted," he snarled at her. "You don't suppose I'm a bloody saint, do you?"

"And all the beautiful things you told me?"

"That," he said cruelly, "is just a line I've found that women fall for. They're all so bored and so starved for beauty—as they generally put it."

"Even the garden?" Her question was barely audible through the sobs that threatened to suffocate her.

He looked at her and perhaps his expression softened just a trifle.

"What's outside," he said flatly, "is just a little worse than either of you can imagine." He tapped his temple. "The garden's all here."

"You've killed it," she wept. "You've killed it in me. You've both killed everything that's beautiful. But you're worse," she screamed at Patrick, "because he only killed beauty once, but you brought it to life just so you could kill it again. Oh, I can't stand it! I won't stand it!" And she began to scream.

Patrick started toward her, but she broke off and whirled away from him to the window, her eyes crazy.

"You've been lying to us," she cried. "The garden's there. I know it is. But you don't want to share it with anyone."

"No, no, Euphemia," Patrick protested anxiously. "It's hell out there, believe me. I wouldn't lie to you about it."

"Wouldn't lie to me!" she mocked. "Are you afraid, too?"

With a sudden pull, she jerked open the window and stood before the blank green-tinged oblong of darkness that seemed to press into the room like a menacing, heavy, wind-urged curtain.

At that Hank cried out a shocked, pleading, "Effie!"

She ignored him. "I can't be cooped up here any longer," she said. "And I won't, now that I know. I'm going to the garden."

Both men sprang at her, but they were too late. She leaped lightly to the sill, and by the time they had flung themselves against it, her footsteps were already hurrying off into the darkness.

"Effie, come back! Come back!" Hank shouted after her desperately, no longer thinking to cringe from the man beside him, or how the gun was pointed. "I love you, Effie. Come back!"

Patrick added his voice. "Come back, Euphemia. You'll be safe if you come back right away. Come back to your home."

No answer to that at all.

They both strained their eyes through the greenish murk. They could barely make out a shadowy figure about half a block down the near-black canyon of the dismal, dust-blown street, into which the greenish moonlight hardly reached. It seemed to them that the figure was scooping something up from the pavement and letting it sift down along its arms and over its bosom.

"Go out and get her, man," Patrick urged the other. "For if I go out for her, I warn you I won't bring her back. She said something about having stood the dust better than most, and that's enough for me."

But Hank, chained by his painfully learned habits and by something else, could not move.

And then a ghostly voice came whispering down the street, chanting, "Fire can hurt me, or water, or the weight of Earth. But the dust is my friend."

Patrick spared the other man one more look. Then, without a word, he vaulted up and ran off.

Hank stood there. After perhaps a half minute he remembered to close his mouth when he inhaled. Finally he was sure the street was empty. As he started to close the window, there was a little mew.

He picked up the cat and gently put it outside. Then he did close the window, and the shutters, and bolted them, and took up the Geiger counter, and mechanically began to count himself.

—FRITZ LEIBER

Transcriber's Note:

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The Aggravation of Elmer

By ROBERT ARTHUR

_The world would beat a path to
Elmer's door--but he had to go
carry the door along with him!_

It was the darnedest traffic jam I'd ever seen in White Plains. For two blocks ahead of me, Main Street was gutter to gutter with stalled cars, trucks and buses.

If I hadn't been in such a hurry to get back to the shop, I might have paid more attention. I might have noticed nobody was leaning on his horn. Or that at least a quarter of the drivers were out peering under their hoods.

But at the time it didn't register. I gave the tie-up a passing glance and was turning up the side street toward Biltom Electronics--Bill-Tom, get it?--when I saw Marge threading her way to the curb. She was leading a small blonde girl of about eight, who clutched a child-size hatbox in her hand. Marge was hot and exasperated, but small fry was as cool and composed as a vanilla cone.

I waited. Even flushed and disheveled, Marge is a treat to look at. She is tall and slender, with brown eyes that match her hair, a smile that first crinkles around her eyes, then sneaks down and becomes a full-fledged grin--

But I'm getting off the subject.

"Honestly, Bill!" Marge said as she saw me. "The traffic nowadays! We've been tied up for fifteen minutes. I finally decided to get off the bus and walk, even though it is about a hundred in the shade."

"Come along to the shop," I suggested. "The reception room is air-conditioned and you can watch the world's first baseball game telecast in color. The Giants versus the Dodgers, Carl Erskine pitching."

Marge brightened. "That'll be more fun than shopping, won't it, Doreen?" she asked, looking down at the kid. "Bill, this is Doreen. She lives across the street from me. Her mother's at the dentist and I said I'd look after her for the day."

"Hello, Doreen," I said. "What have you in the hatbox? Doll clothes?"

Doreen gave me a look of faint disgust. "No," she piped, in a high treble. "An unhappy genii."

"An unhappy--" I did a double take. "Oh, an unhappy genii? Maybe he's unhappy because you won't let him out, ha ha." Even to myself, I sounded idiotic.

Doreen looked at me pityingly. "It's not a he, it's a thing. Elmer made it."

I knew when I was losing, so I quit.

* * * * *

I hurried Marge and Doreen along toward our little two-story building. Once we got into the air-conditioned reception room, Marge sank down gratefully onto the settee and I switched on the television set with the big 24-inch tube Tom had built.

Biltom Electronics makes TV components, computer parts, things like that. Tom Kennedy is the brains. Me, Bill Rawlins, I do the legwork, and tend to the business details.

"It's uncanny the way all those cars suddenly stopped when our bus broke down," Marge said as we waited for the picture to come on. "Any day now this civilization of ours will get so complicated a bus breaking down someplace will bring the whole thing to a halt. Then where will we be?"

"Elmer says silly-zation is doomed!" Doreen put in happily.

The way she rolled the word out made me stare at her.

Marge only nodded. "That's what Elmer says, all right," she agreed, a trifle grim.

"Why does Elmer say silly-zation is doomed?" I asked Doreen.

"Because it's getting hotter." The kid gave it to me straight. "All the ice at the North Pole is gonna melt. The ocean is gonna rise two hundred feet. Then everybody who doesn't live on a hill is gonna be drowned. That's what Elmer says and Elmer isn't ever wrong."

[Illustration: Illustrated by CAVAT]

Doreen they called her! Why not Cassandra? The stuff kids spout these days!

I gave her a foolish grin. I wanted Marge to get the idea I was really a family man at heart. "That's very interesting, Doreen. Now look, there's the baseball game. Let's watch, shall we?"

We weren't very late after all. It was the top half of the second inning, the score one to one, Erskine in trouble with two men on and only one down. The colors were beautiful. Marge and I were just settling back to watch when Doreen wrinkled her nose.

"I saw that game yesterday!" she announced.

"You couldn't have, sweetheart," I told her. "Because it's only being played today. The world's first ball game ever broadcast in color."

"There was a game on Elmer's TV," Doreen insisted. "The picture was bigger and the colors prettier, too."

"Absolutely impossible." I was a little sore. I hate kids who tell fibs. "There never was a game broadcast in color before. And, anyway, you won't find a color tube this big any place outside of a laboratory."

"But it's true, Bill." Marge looked at me, wide-eyed. "Elmer only has a little seven-inch black and white set his uncle gave him. But he's rigged up some kind of lens in front of it, and it projects a big color picture on a white screen."

I saw that she was serious. My eyes bugged slightly. "Listen," I said, "who is this Elmer character? I want to meet him!"

"He's my cousin from South America," Doreen answered. "He thinks grownups are stupid." She turned to Marge. "I have to go to the bathroom," she said primly.

"Through that door." Marge pointed.

Doreen trotted out, clutching her hat box.

* * * * *

"Elmer thinks grownups are stupid?" I howled. "Listen, how old is this character who says silly-zation is doomed and can convert a black and white broadcast into color?"

"He's thirteen," Marge told me. I goggled at her. "Thirteen," she repeated. "His father is some South American scientist. His mother died ten years ago."

I sat down beside her. I lit a cigarette. My hands were shaking. "Tell me about him. _All_ about him."

"Why, I don't know very much," Marge said. "Last year Elmer was sick, some tropic disease. His father sent him up here to recuperate. Now Alice--that's his aunt, Doreen's mother--is at her wits' end, he makes her so nervous."

I lit another cigarette before I realized I already had one. "And he invents things? A boy genius? Young Tom Edison and all that?"

Marge frowned. "I suppose you could say that," she conceded. "He has the garage full of stuff he's made or bought with the allowance his father sends him. And if you come within ten feet of it without permission, you get an electric shock right out of thin air. But that's only part of it. It--" she gave a helpless gesture--"it's Elmer's effect on everybody. Everybody over fifteen, that is. He sits there, a little, dark, squinched-up kid wearing thick glasses and talking about how climatic changes inside fifty years will flood half the world, cause the collapse of civilization--"

"Wait a minute!" I cut in. "Scientists seem to think that's possible in a few thousand years. Not fifty."

"Elmer says fifty," Marge stated flatly. "From the way he talks, I suspect he's figured out a way to speed things up and is going to try it some day just to see if it works. Meanwhile he fools around out there in the garage, sneering about the billions of dollars spent to develop color TV. He says his lens will turn any ordinary broadcast into color for about twenty-five dollars. He says it's typical of the muddled thinking of our so-called scientists--I'm quoting now--to do everything backward and overlook fundamental principles."

"Bro-ther!" I said.

Doreen came trotting back in then, with her hat box. "I'm tired of that game," she said, giving the TV set a bored glance. And as she said it the tube went dark. The sound cut off.

"Damn!" I swore. "Must be a power failure!" I grabbed the phone and jiggled the hook. No dice. The phone was dead, too.

"You're funny," Doreen giggled. "It's just the unhappy genii. See?"

She flicked over the catch on the hatbox.

And the picture came back on. The sound started up. "--swings and misses for strike two!" The air conditioner began to hum.

Marge and I stared. Mouths open. Wide.

* * * * *

"You did that, Doreen?" I asked it very carefully. "You made the television stop and start again?"

"The unhappy genii did," Doreen told me. "Like this." She flicked the catch back. The TV picture blacked out. The sound stopped in the middle of a word. The air conditioner whispered into silence.

Then she flipped the catch the other way.

"--fouls the second ball into the screen," the announcer said. Picture okay. Air conditioner operating. Everything normal except my pulse and respiration.

"Doreen, sweetheart--" I took a step toward her--"what's in that box? What _is_ an unhappy genii?"

"Not unhappy." You know how scornful an eight-year-old can be? Well, she was. "Unhap-_pen_. It makes things unhappen. Anything that works by electracity, it stops. Elmer calls it his unhappen genii. Just for fun."

"Oh, now I get it," I said brightly. "It makes electricity not work--unhappen. Like television sets and air conditioners and automobiles and bus engines."

Doreen giggled.

Marge sat bolt upright. "Doreen! _You_ caused that traffic jam? You and that--that gadget of Elmer's?"

Doreen nodded. "It made all the automobile engines stop, just like Elmer said. Elmer's never wrong."

Marge looked at me. I looked at Marge.

"A field of some kind," I said. "A field that prevents an electric current from flowing. Meaning no combustion motor using an electric spark can operate. No electric motors. No telephones. No radio or TV."

"Is that important?" Marge asked.

"Important?" I yelled. "Think of the possibilities just as a weapon! You could blank out a whole nation's transportation, its communications, its industry--"

I got hold of myself. I smiled my best I-love-children smile. "Doreen," I said, "let me look at Elmer's unhappen genii."

The kid clutched the box.

"Elmer told me not to let anybody look at it. He said he'd statuefy me if I did. He said nobody would understand it anyway. He said he might show it to Mr. Einstein, but not anybody else."

"That's Elmer, all right," Marge muttered.

I found myself breathing hard. I edged toward Doreen and put my hand on the hatbox. "Just one quick look, Doreen," I said. "No one will ever know."

She didn't answer. Just pulled the box away.

I pulled it back.

She pulled.

I pulled.

"Bill--" Marge called warningly. Too late. The lid of the hatbox came off in my hands.

* * * * *

There was a bright flash, the smell of insulation burning, and the unhappen geni fell out and scattered all over the floor.

Doreen looked smug. "Now Elmer will be angry at you. Maybe he'll disintegrate you. Or paralize you and statuefy you. Forever."

"He might at that, Bill," Marge shuddered. "I wouldn't put anything past him."

I wasn't listening. I was scrambling after the mess of tubes, condensers and power packs scattered over the rug. Some of them were still wired together, but most of them had broken loose. Elmer was certainly one heck of a sloppy workman. Hadn't even soldered the connections. Just twisted the wires together.

I looked at the stuff in my hands. It made as much sense as a radio run over by a truck.

"We'll take it back to Elmer," I told Doreen, speaking very carefully. "I'll give him lots of money to build another. He can come down here and use our shop. We have lots of nice equipment he'd like."

Doreen tossed her head. "I don't think he'll wanta. He'll be mad at you. Anyway, Elmer is busy working on aggravation now."

"That's for sure!" Marge said in heartfelt tones.

"Aggravation, eh?" I grinned like an idiot. "Well, well! I'll bet he's good at it. But let's go see him right away."

"Bill!" Marge signaled me to one side. "Maybe you'd better not try to see Elmer," she whispered. "I mean, if he can build a thing like this in his garage, maybe he can build a disintegrator or a paralysis ray or something. There's no use taking chances."

"You read too many comics," I laughed it off. "He's only a kid, isn't he? What do you think he is? A superman?"

"Yes," Marge said flatly.

"Look, Marge!" I said in feverish excitement. "I've got to talk to Elmer! I've got to get the rights to that TV color lens and this electricity interruptor and anything else he may have developed!"

Marge kept trying to protest, but I simply grabbed her and Doreen and hustled them out to my car. Doreen lived in a wooded, hilly section a little north of White Plains. I made it in ten minutes.

* * * * *

Marge had said Elmer worked in the garage. I kept going up the driveway, swung sharp around the big house--and slammed on the brakes.

Marge screamed.

We skidded to a stop with our front end hanging over what looked like a bomb crater in the middle of the driveway.

I swallowed my heart down again, while I backed away fast.

We had almost plunged into a hole forty feet across and twenty feet deep in the middle. The hole was perfectly round, like a half section of a grapefruit.

"What's this?" I asked. "Where's the garage?"

"That's where the garage should be." Marge looked dazed. "But it's gone!"

I took another look at that hole scooped out with geometrical precision, and turned to Doreen. "What did you say Elmer was working on?"

"Agg--" she sobbed, "agg--agg--aggravation." She began to bawl in earnest. "Now he's gone. He's mad. He won't ever come back, I betcha."

"That's a fact," I muttered. "He may not have been mad, but he certainly was aggravated. Marge, listen! This is a mystery. We've just got to let it stay a mystery. We don't know anything, understand? The cops will finally decide Elmer blew himself up, and we'll leave it at that. One thing I'm pretty sure about--he's not coming back."

* * * * *

So that's how it was. Tom Kennedy keeps trying and trying to put Elmer's unhappen genii back together again. And every time he fails he takes it out on me because I didn't get to Elmer sooner. But you can see perfectly well he's way off base, trying to make out I could have done a thing to prevent what happened.

Is it my fault if the dumb kid didn't know enough to take the proper precautions when he decided to develop anti-gravitation--and got shot off, garage and all, someplace into outer space?

What do they teach kids nowadays, anyway?

--ROBERT ARTHUR

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The Lonely Ones

By Edward W. Ludwig

Illustrated by PAUL ORBAN

The line between noble dreams and madness is thin, and loneliness can push men past it....

Onward sped the _Wanderer_, onward through cold, silent infinity, on and on, an insignificant pencil of silver lost in the terrible, brooding blackness.

But even more awful than the blackness was the loneliness of the six men who inhabited the silver rocket. They moved in loneliness as fish move in water. Their lives revolved in loneliness as planets revolve in space and time. They bore their loneliness like a shroud, and it was as much a part of them as sight in their eyes. Loneliness was both their brother and their god.

Yet, like a tiny flame in the darkness, there was hope, a savage, desperate hope that grew with the passing of each day, each month, and each year.

And at last....

"Lord," breathed Captain Sam Wiley.

Lieutenant Gunderson nodded. "It's a big one, isn't it?"

"It's a big one," repeated Captain Wiley.

They stared at the image in the _Wanderer's_ forward visi-screen, at the great, shining gray ball. They stared hard, for it was like an enchanted, God-given fruit handed them on a star-flecked platter of midnight. It was like the answer to a thousand prayers, a shining symbol of hope which could mean the end of loneliness.

"It's ten times as big as Earth," mused Lieutenant Gunderson. "Do you think this'll be it, Captain?"

"I'm afraid to think."

A thoughtful silence.

"Captain."

"Yes?"

"Do you hear my heart pounding?"

Captain Wiley smiled. "No. No, of course not."

"It seems like everybody should be hearing it. But we shouldn't get excited, should we? We mustn't hope too hard." He bit his lip. "But there should be life there, don't you think, Captain?"

"There may be."

"Nine years, Captain. Think of it. It's taken us nine years to get here. There's got to be life."

"Prepare for deceleration, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Gunderson's tall, slim body sagged for an instant. Then his eyes brightened.

"Yes, sir!"

Captain Sam Wiley continued to stare at the beautiful gray globe in the visi-screen. He was not like Gunderson, with boyish eagerness and anxiety flowing out of him in a ceaseless babble. His emotion was as great, or greater, but it was imprisoned within him, like swirling, foaming liquid inside a corked jug.

It wouldn't do to encourage the men too much. Because, if they were disappointed....

He shook his silver-thatched head. There it was, he thought. A new world. A world that, perhaps, held life.

Life. It was a word uttered only with reverence, for throughout the Solar System, with the exception of on Earth, there had been only death.

First it was the Moon, airless and lifeless. That had been expected, of course.

But Mars. For centuries men had dreamed of Mars and written of Mars with its canals and dead cities, with its ancient men and strange animals. Everyone knew there was or had been life on Mars.

The flaming rockets reached Mars, and the canals became volcanic crevices, and the dead cities became jagged peaks of red stone, and the endless sands were smooth, smooth, smooth, untouched by feet of living

creatures. There was plant-life, a species of green-red lichen in the Polar regions. But nowhere was there real life.

Then Venus, with its dust and wind. No life there. Not even the stars to make one think of home. Only the dust and wind, a dark veil of death screaming eternally over hot dry land.

And Jupiter, with its seas of ice; and hot Mercury, a cracked, withered mummy of a planet, baked as hard and dry as an ancient walnut in a furnace.

Next, the airless, rocky asteroids, and frozen Saturn with its swirling ammonia snows. And last, the white, silent worlds, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto.

World after world, all dead, with no sign of life, no reminder of life, and no promise of life.

Thus the loneliness had grown. It was not a child of Earth. It was not born in the hearts of those who scurried along city pavements or of those in the green fields or of those in the cool, clean houses.

It was a child of the incredible distances, of the infinite night, of emptiness and silence. It was born in the hearts of the slit-eyed men, the oldish young men, the spacemen.

For without life on other worlds, where was the sky's challenge? Why go on and on to discover only worlds of death?

The dream of the spacemen turned from the planets to the stars. Somewhere in the galaxy or in other galaxies there had to be life. Life was a wonderful and precious thing. It wasn't right that it should be confined to a single, tiny planet. If it were, then life would seem meaningless. Mankind would be a freak, a cosmic accident.

And now the Wanderer was on the first interstellar flight, hurtling through the dark spaces to Proxima Centauri. Moving silently, as if motionless, yet at a speed of 160,000 miles a second. And ahead loomed the great, gray planet, the only planet of the sun, growing larger, larger, each instant....

A gentle, murmuring hum filled the ship. The indicator lights on the control panel glowed like a swarm of pink eyes.

"Deceleration compensator adjusted for 12 G's, sir," reported Lieutenant Gunderson.

Captain Wiley nodded, still studying the image of the planet.

"There—there's something else, Captain."

"Yes?"

"It's Brown, sir. He's drunk."

Captain Wiley turned, a scowl on his hard, lined face. "Drunk? Where'd he get the stuff?"

"He saved it, sir, saved it for nine years. Said he was going to drink it when we discovered life."

"We haven't discovered life yet."

"I know. He said he wouldn't set foot on the planet if he was sober. Said if there isn't life there, he couldn't take it—unless he was drunk."

Captain Wiley grunted. "All right."

They looked at the world.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful, Captain? Just think—to meet another race. It wouldn't matter what they were like, would it? If they were primitive, we could teach them things. If they were ahead of us, they could teach us. You know what I'd like? To have someone meet us, to gather around us. It wouldn't matter if they were afraid of us or even if they tried to kill us. We'd know that we aren't alone."

"I know what you mean," said Captain Wiley. Some of his emotion overflowed the prison of his body. "There's no thrill in landing on dead worlds. If no one's there to see you, you don't feel like a hero."

"That's it, Captain! That's why I came on this crazy trip. I guess that's why we all came. I...."

Captain Wiley cleared his throat. "Lieutenant, commence deceleration. 6 G's."

"Yes, sir!"

The planet grew bigger, filling the entire visi-screen.

Someone coughed behind Captain Wiley.

"Sir, the men would like to look at the screen. They can't see the planet out of the ports yet." The speaker was Doyle, the ship's Engineer, a dry, tight-skinned little man.

"Sure." Captain Wiley stepped aside.

Doyle looked, then Parker and Fong. Just three of them, for Watkins had sliced his wrists the fourth year out. And Brown was drunk.

As they looked, a realization came to Captain Wiley. The men were getting old. The years had passed so gradually that he'd never really noticed it before. Lieutenant Gunderson had been a kid just out of Space Academy. Parker and Doyle and Fong, too, had been in their twenties. They had been boys. And now something was gone—the sharp eyes and sure movements of youth, the smooth skin and thick, soft hair.

Now they had become men. And yet for a few moments, as they gazed at the screen, they seemed like happy, expectant children.

"I wish Brown could see this," Doyle murmured. "He says now he isn't going to get off his couch till we land and discover life. Says he won't dare look for himself."

"The planet's right for life," said Fong, the dark-faced astro-physicist. "Atmosphere forty per cent oxygen, lots of water vapor. No poisonous gases, according to spectroscopic analyses. It should be ideal for life."

"There is life there," said Parker, the radarman. "You know why? Because we've given up eighteen years of our lives. Nine years to get here, nine to get back. I'm thirty now. I was twenty-one when we left Earth. I gave up all those good years. They say that you can have something if you pay enough for it. Well, we've paid for this. There has to be a—a sort of universal justice. That's why I know there's life here, life that moves and thinks—maybe even life we can talk to."

"You need a drink," said Fong.

"It's getting bigger," murmured Lieutenant Gunderson.

"The Centaurians," mused Doyle, half to himself. "What'll they be like? Monsters or men? If Parker's right about universal justice, they'll be men."

"Hey, where there's men, there's women!" yelled Parker. "A Centaurian woman! Say!"

"Look at those clouds!" exclaimed Doyle. "Damn it, we can't see the surface."

"Hey, there! Look there, to the right! See it? It's silver, down in a hole in the clouds. It's like a city!"

"Maybe it's just water."

"No, it's a city!"

"Bring 'er down, Captain. God, Captain, bring 'er down fast!"

"Drag Brown in here! He ought to see this!"

"Can't you bring 'er down faster, Captain?"

"Damn it, it is a city!"

"Why doesn't someone get Brown?"

"Take to your couches, men," said Captain Wiley. "Landing's apt to be a bit bumpy. Better strap yourselves in."

Down went the rocket, more slowly now, great plumes of scarlet thundering from its forward braking jets. Down, down into soft, cotton-like clouds, the whiteness sliding silently past the ports.

Suddenly, a droning voice:

"To those in the ship from the planet called Earth: Please refrain from landing at this moment. You will await landing instructions."

Parker leaped off his couch, grasping a stanchion for support. "That voice! It was human!"

Captain Wiley's trembling hand moved over the jet-control panel. The ship slowed in its descent. The clouds outside the portholes became motionless, a milky whiteness pressed against the ship.

"The voice!" Parker cried again. "Am I crazy? Did everyone hear it?"

Captain Wiley turned away from the panel. "We heard it, Parker. It was in our minds. Telepathy."

He smiled. "Yes, the planet is inhabited. There are intelligent beings on it. Perhaps they're more intelligent than we are."

It was strange. The men had hoped, dreamed, prayed for this moment. Now they sat stunned, unable to comprehend, their tongues frozen.

"We'll see them very soon," said Captain Wiley, his voice quivering. "We'll wait for their directions."

Breathlessly, they waited.

Captain Wiley's fingers drummed nervously on the base of the control panel. Lieutenant Gunderson rose from his couch, stood in the center of the cabin, then returned to his couch.

Silence, save for the constant, rumbling roar of the jets which held the ship aloft.

"I wonder how long it'll be," murmured Fong at last.

"It seems like a long time!" burst Parker.

"We've waited nine years," said Captain Wiley. "We can wait a few more minutes."

They waited.

"Good Lord!" said Parker. "How long is it going to be? What time is it? We've been waiting an hour! What kind of people are they down there?"

"Maybe they've forgotten about us," said Fong.

"That's it!" cried Parker. "They've forgotten about us! Hey, you! Down there—you that talked to us! We're still here, damn it! We want to land!"

"Parker," said Captain Wiley, sternly.

Parker sat down on his couch, his lips quivering.

Then came the voice:

"We regret that a landing is impossible at this moment. Our field is overcrowded, and your vessel is without priority. You must wait your turn."

Captain Wiley stared forward at nothing. "Whoever you are," he

whispered, "please understand that we have come a long way to reach your planet. Our trip...."

"We do not wish to discuss your trip. You will be notified when landing space is available."

Captain Wiley's body shook. "Wait, tell us who you are. What do you look like? Tell us...."

"Talking to you is quite difficult. We must form our thoughts so as to form word-patterns in your minds. You will be notified."

"Wait a minute!" called Captain Wiley.

No answer.

Captain Wiley straightened in an effort to maintain dignity.

They waited....

It was night.

The darkness was an impenetrable blanket, a solid thing, like thick black velvet glued over the ports. It was worse than the darkness of space.

Captain Wiley sat before the control panel, slowly beating his fists against the arms of his chair, a human metronome ticking off the slow seconds.

Parker stood before a porthole.

"Hey, look, Captain! There's a streak of red, like a meteor. And there's another!"

Captain Wiley rose, looked out. "They're rockets. They're going to land. These people are highly advanced."

His face became grim. Below them lay a planet, an intelligent race hidden beneath clouds and darkness. What manner of creatures were they? How great was their civilization? What marvelous secrets had their scientists discovered? What was their food like, their women, their whiskey?

The questions darted endlessly through his mind like teasing needle-points. All these wondrous things lay below them, and here they sat, like starving men, their hands tied, gazing upon a steaming but unobtainable dinner. So near and yet so far.

He trembled. The emotion grew within him until it burst out as water bursts through the cracked wall of a dam. He became like Parker.

"Why should we wait?" he yelled. "Why must we land in their field? Parker! Prepare to release flares! We're going down! We'll land anywhere—in a street, in the country. We don't have to wait for orders!"

Parker bounced off his couch. Someone called, "Brown, we're going to

land!"

A scurrying of feet, the rush of taut-muscle bodies, the babble of excited voices.

"We're going down!"

"_We're going down!_"

The grumble of the _Wanderer's_ jets loudened, softened, spluttered, loudened again. Vibration filled the ship as it sank downward.

Suddenly it lurched upward, like a child's ball caught in a stream of rising water. The jolt staggered the men. They seized stanchions and bulkhead railings to keep their balance.

"What the hell?"

Abruptly, the strange movement ceased. The ship seemed motionless. There was no vibration.

"Captain," said Lieutenant Gunderson. "There's no change in altitude. We're still at 35,000 feet, no more, no less."

"We _must_ be going down," said Captain Wiley, puzzled. "Kill jets 4 and 6."

The Lieutenant's hands flicked off two switches. A moment later:
"There's no change, Captain."

Then came the voice:

"To those in the vessel from the planet Earth: Please do not oppose orders of the Landing Council. You are the first visitors in the history of our world whom we have had to restrain with physical force. You will be notified when landing space is available."

Morning.

The warm sunlight streamed into the clouds, washing away the last shadows and filtering through the portholes.

The men breakfasted, bathed, shaved, smoked, sat, twisted their fingers, looked out the ports. They were silent men, with dark shadows about their eyes and with tight, white-lipped mouths.

Frequently, the clouds near them were cut by swift, dark shapes swooping downward. The shapes were indistinct in the cotton-like whiteness, but obviously they were huge, like a dozen _Wanderers_ made into one.

"Those ships are big," someone murmured, without enthusiasm.

"It's a busy spaceport," grumbled Captain Wiley.

Thoughts, words, movements came so slowly it was like walking under water. Enthusiasm was dead. The men were automatons, sitting, waiting, eating, sitting, waiting.

A day passed, and a night.

"Maybe they've forgotten us," said Fong.

No one answered. The thought had been voiced before, a hundred times.

Then, at last, the droning words:

"To those in the vessel from the planet Earth: You will now land. We will carry you directly over the field. Then you will descend straight down. The atmosphere is suitable to your type of life and is free of germs. You will not need protection."

The men stared at one another.

"Hey," Doyle said, "did you hear that? He says we can go down."

The men blinked. Captain Wiley swallowed hard. He rose with a stiff, slow, nervous hesitancy.

"We're going down," he mumbled, as if repeating the words over and over in his mind and trying to believe them.

The men stirred as realization sprouted and grew. They stirred like lethargic animals aroused from the long, dreamless sleep of hibernation.

"We're going to land," breathed Parker, unbelievably.

The _Wanderer_ moved as though caught in the grip of a giant, invisible hand.

The voice said:

"You may now descend."

Captain Wiley moved to the jet-control panel. "Lieutenant!" he snapped. "Wake up. Let's go!"

The ship sank downward through the thick sea of clouds. The men walked to the ports. A tenseness, an excitement grew in their faces, like dying flame being fanned into its former brilliancy.

Out of the clouds loomed monstrous, shining, silver spires and towers, Cyclopean bridges, gigantic lake-like mirrors, immense golden spheres. It was a nightmare world, a jungle of fantastic shape and color.

The men gasped, whispered, murmured, the flame of their excitement growing, growing.

"The whole planet is a city!" breathed Parker.

Thump!

The _Wanderer_ came to rest on a broad landing field of light blue stone. The jets coughed, spluttered, died. The ship quivered, then lay still, its interior charged with an electric, pregnant silence.

"You first, Captain." Lieutenant Gunderson's voice cracked, and his face was flushed. "You be the first to go outside."

Captain Wiley stepped through the airlock, his heart pounding. It was over now—all the bewilderment, the numbness.

And his eyes were shining. He'd waited so long that it was hard to believe the waiting was over. But it was, he told himself. The journey was over, and the waiting, and now the loneliness would soon be over. Mankind was not alone. It was a good universe after all!

He stepped outside, followed by Lieutenant Gunderson, then by Parker, Doyle and Fong.

He rubbed his eyes. This couldn't be! A world like this couldn't exist! He shook his head, blinked furiously.

"It—it can't be true," he mumbled to Lieutenant Gunderson. "We're still on the ship—dreaming."

The landing field was huge, perhaps ten miles across, and its sides were lined with incredible ships, the smallest of which seemed forty times as large as the Wanderer. There were silver ships, golden ships, black ships, round ships, transparent ships, cigar-shaped ships, flat-topped ships.

And scattered over the field were—creatures.

A few were the size of men, but most were giants by comparison. Some were humanoid, some reptilian. Some were naked, some clad in helmeted suits, some enveloped with a shimmering, water-like luminescence. The creatures walked, slithered, floated, crawled.

Beyond the ships and the field lay the great city, its web-work of towers, minarets, spheres and bridges like the peaks of an enormous mountain range stretching up into space itself. The structures were like the colors of a rainbow mixed in a cosmic paint pot, molded and solidified into fantastic shapes by a mad god.

"I—I'm going back to the ship," stammered Parker. The whiteness of death was in his face. "I'm going to stay with Brown."

He turned, and then he screamed.

"Captain, the ship's moving!"

Silently, the Wanderer was drifting to the side of the field.

The toneless voice said:

"We are removing your vessel so that other descending ships will not damage it."

Captain Wiley shouted into the air. "Wait! Don't go away! Help us! Where can we see you?"

The voice seemed to hesitate. "It is difficult for us to speak in thoughts that you understand."

Silence.

Captain Wiley studied the faces of his men. They were not faces of conquerors or of triumphant spacemen. They were the faces of dazed, frightened children who had caught a glimpse of Hell. He attempted, feebly, to smile.

"All right," he said loudly, "so it isn't like we expected. So no one came to meet us with brass bands and ten cent flags. We've still succeeded, haven't we? We've found life that's intelligent beyond our comprehension. What if our own civilization is insignificant by comparison? Look at those beings. Think of what we can learn from them. Why, their ships might have exceeded the speed of light. They might be from other galaxies!"

"Let's find out," said Parker.

They strode to the nearest ship, an immense, smooth, bluish sphere. Two creatures stood before it, shaped like men and yet twice the size of men. They wore white, skin-tight garments that revealed muscular bodies like those of gods.

They looked at Captain Wiley and smiled.

One of them pointed toward the _Wanderer_. Their smiles widened and then they laughed.

They laughed gently, understandingly, but they _laughed_.

And then they turned away.

"Talk to them," Parker urged.

"How?" Beads of perspiration shone on Captain Wiley's face.

"Any way. Go ahead."

Captain Wiley wiped his forehead. "We are from Earth, the third planet...."

The two god-like men seemed annoyed. They walked away, ignoring the Earthmen.

Captain Wiley spat. "All right, so they won't talk to us. Look at that city! Think of the things we can see there and tell the folks on Earth about! Why, we'll be heroes!"

"Let's go," said Parker, his voice quavering around the edges.

They walked toward a large, oval opening in a side of the field, a hole between mountainous, conical structures that seemed like the entrance to a street.

Suddenly breath exploded from Captain Wiley's lungs. His body jerked back. He fell to the blue stone pavement.

Then he scrambled erect, scowling, his hands outstretched. He felt a soft, rubbery, invisible substance.

"It's a wall!" he exclaimed.

The voice droned:

"To those of Earth: Beings under the 4th stage of Galactic Development are restricted to the area of the landing field. We are sorry. In your primitive stage it would be unwise for you to learn the nature of our civilization. Knowledge of our science would be abused by your people, and used for the thing you call war. We hope that you have been inspired by what you have seen. However, neither we nor the other visitors to our planet are permitted to hold contact with you. It is suggested that you and your vessel depart."

"Listen, you!" screamed Parker. "We've been nine years getting here! By Heaven, we won't leave now! We're...."

"We have no time to discuss the matter. Beings under the 4th stage of Galactic...."

"Never mind!" spat Captain Wiley.

Madness flamed in Parker's eyes. "We won't go! I tell you, we _won't_, we _won't_!"

His fists streaked through the air as if at an invisible enemy. He ran toward the wall.

He collided with a jolt that sent him staggering backward, crying, sobbing, screaming, all at once.

Captain Wiley stepped forward, struck him on the chin. Parker crumpled.

They stood looking at his body, which lay motionless except for the slow rising and falling of his chest.

"What now, Captain?" asked Lieutenant Gunderson.

Captain Wiley thought for a few seconds.

Then he said, "We're ignorant country bumpkins, Lieutenant, riding into the city in a chugging jalopy. We're stupid savages, trying to discuss the making of fire with the creators of atomic energy. We're children racing a paper glider against an atomic-powered jet. We're too ridiculous to be noticed. We're tolerated—but nothing more."

"Shall we go home?" asked Fong, a weariness in his voice.

Lieutenant Gunderson scratched his neck. "I don't think I'd want to go home now. Could you bear to tell the truth about what happened?"

Fong looked wistfully at the shining city. "If we told the truth, they probably wouldn't believe us. We've failed. It sounds crazy. We reached Proxima Centauri and found life, and yet somehow we failed. No, I wouldn't like to go home."

"Still, we learned something," said Doyle. "We know now that there is

life on worlds beside our own. Somewhere there must be other races like ours."

They looked at each other, strangely, for a long, long moment.

At last Lieutenant Gunderson asked, "How far is Alpha Centauri?"

Captain Wiley frowned. "_Alpha_ Centauri?" Through his mind swirled chaotic visions of colossal distances, eternal night, and lonely years. He sought hard to find a seed of hope in his mind, and yet there was no seed. There were only a coldness and an emptiness.

Suddenly, the voice:

"Yes, Men of Earth, we suggest that you try Alpha Centauri."

The men stood silent and numb, like bewildered children, as the implication of those incredible words sifted into their consciousness.

Finally Fong said, "Did—did you hear that? He said..."

Captain Sam Wiley nodded, very slowly. "Yes. Alpha Centauri. _Alpha_ Centauri."

His eyes began to twinkle, and then he smiled....

—————

Onward sped the _Wanderer_, onward through cold, silent infinity, on and on, an insignificant pencil of silver lost in the terrible, brooding blackness.

Yet even greater than the blackness was the flaming hope in the six men who inhabited the silver rocket. They moved in hope as fish move in water. Their lives revolved in hope as planets revolve in space and time. They bore their hope like a jeweled crown, and it was as much a part of them as sight in their eyes. Hope was both their brother and their god.

And there was no loneliness.

THE END

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Wait for Weight

By JACK McKENTY

 _Sometimes the best incentive is to tell a man that success
 will throw him out of a job!_

Illustrated by SIBLEY

When Dr. Allport Brinton's alarm clock sounded, it brought madness. It was very clever; it not only rang chimes of amazing penetrating power, it turned on all the lights in the room, closed the window, and started his bath water running. But this morning it was not appreciated. In fact, as Dr. Brinton got out of bed, he silently called down evil on the technician who had built it for him.

[Illustration]

The "off" switch was on the wall farthest away from his bed and was controlled by a hairtrigger combination dial that couldn't be operated by anyone not fully awake. Dr. Brinton fumbled for a while, then gave up and started looking for his bedroom slippers. They had apparently crawled away during the night.

He padded into his bathroom barefoot. He was about to see what a hot bath would do for what he had already diagnosed as a histamine headache when the alarm clock, having decided that anyone who could sleep through ten minutes of chiming was unwakable, stopped chiming, turned off the lights, opened the window, and let all the water out.

Dr. Brinton was walking back toward the light switch when he tripped on his bedroom slippers and fell back into bed. No further invitation was necessary; he slept till noon.

Dr. Brinton unmistakably had a hangover. Considering the party he had attended the night before, it was not surprising. Actually, it was remarkable that he had been able to get out of bed at all. During the fourteen years that the Rocket Research Station had been in operation, the parties that were held every time another test flight resulted in failure had grown from a few drinks in somebody's room to a mammoth bust-up that left the whole place partially paralyzed for days afterward.

First as chief chemist, and later as director of the Station, Dr. Brinton had attended every one of the scores of parties during every one of the fourteen years. It spoke well for his endurance to say that he was back at his office at one o'clock. Some people didn't make it until the next day.

* * * * *

His secretary, who didn't drink, was one of very few who were at work on time. She walked into his office and stood in front of his desk, tapping her foot. Her facial expression showed that she thought people who got drunk at parties were amoral, degenerate, and entirely unfit for administrative positions. Dr. Brinton, who had been mentally comparing the relative merits of Prussic acid and hanging as pain relievers, sat up straight to prove that he was moral, alert, and ready for any problem that might come up. His secretary sniffed to indicate that she didn't believe him. Dr. Brinton dropped his eyes to admit that maybe he wasn't at his best at the moment, but it was only a temporary condition, and by tomorrow he would be okay.

"In two minutes you'll wish you were dead," said his secretary. "Read this."

She handed him a letter. He read it and his knuckles cracked as he gripped the arms of his chair.

"Senator MacNeill coming to visit _here_?" he cried in alarm. Though his voice was squeaky, he was surprised to hear it at all. "Get me a line to Washington, our top priority, Audrey at the Naval Department."

The call was put through.

"Commander Audrey? This is Brinton at the Station. Joe MacNeill is coming to visit us. Can you head him off?..."

"Yes, I know, but he's on one of his economy drives. We just did a test yesterday and if he inspects this place now, we won't get enough money to build a pinball machine. Delay him a week, anyway...."

"Well, try. I'll arrange a tour for him as best I can, but if he

doesn't come, I'll be much happier. Let me know as soon as possible. Fine. Good-by."

He scribbled a memo and carried it out to his secretary. "Copy of this to all department heads, right away. Phone the commissary and have them get all the decorations taken down in the dining room. Tell them to lay in some steaks for tomorrow. Phone Harry Sparling in Public Relations--alert him V.V.I.P. tomorrow, extra-special tour including all our movies on the subject. I'm going over to the Fuels Department."

Dr. Ferber, head of Fuels, met Dr. Brinton at the door of his lab.

"I just got your memo," he said. "Is that budget-butcher really coming down here?"

Dr. Brinton nodded his head gently. "I'm afraid so. I came over to see what kind of show we can put on for him."

"We have some samples to run on the indoor motors. There are a couple of loads left for the acceleration sled. And I suppose if we work all night we could get a sergeant-major ready, but if he's on an economy drive that might be too elaborate. Just a view of everybody pouring stuff from one test-tube to another might be best."

"Do the samples and run the sled once," Dr. Brinton said. "That should provide enough fire and noise. The rest of it will have to be fast talk. I think I'll go home to bed."

* * * * *

Dr. Brinton considered himself a methodical man. He had bacon and eggs every morning for breakfast. He always took a vitamin pill with his afternoon coffee. And he was used to exactly eight hours sleep. It was this last habit that caused him to wake up that night at midnight; he had gone to bed at four that afternoon and habit is a hard thing to break. At first he thought it was morning, but a glance at his watch hanging on its illuminated pedestal corrected that.

He grunted, rolled over, and waited for sleep to overtake him again. Nothing happened. He turned and stared at the ceiling for a while. Still nothing; he had not felt so wide awake for a long time. Then he was struck by one of the flashes of inspiration that had made him famous--he would raid the refrigerator.

* * * * *

Downstairs, he found that his son Eric had anticipated him by two minutes, and was busy setting the table with cheese, pickles, ice cream, peanut butter, and everything else necessary to keep a sixteen-year-old boy operating at peak efficiency. A pile of books on the table indicated that he had just finished his homework. Dr. Brinton was pleased that his son had worked so late, but the choice of food made him shudder. He rummaged in the refrigerator himself, found a cold pork chop that Eric had somehow overlooked, and bore it to the table in triumph.

"We were dealt a blow today," he said, between mouthfuls.

"Oh?" said Eric, on guard in case it was about his school work.

"Received word that Senator MacNeill is coming here tomorrow. No, today--it's after midnight."

"Oh." It was an "oh" of relief. A senator couldn't be nearly as troublesome as a teacher.

"Don't say 'oh' like that. He'll probably close the Station tight and we'll all be out of work. You don't realize, it, but money has been getting harder and harder to cadge for this place. We're practically running only the Fuels department now."

He got up, threw the bone from his pork chop into a garbage pail, washed his hands at the sink, and sat down again.

He continued, "Wait till he finds out about those four reactor rockets that are cooling off on the Moon, waiting for us to get there. I can hear him scream, 'Five million dollars each! Each full of precious equipment, to say nothing of invaluable fissionable material!' And then this place gets shut down."

Eric had a suggestion. "Give him the old routine about how we have to get men to the Moon or the Russians will do it first and use all the equipment we've sent there without even thanking us."

"Umm," said his father, considering. He shook his head finally. "His answer to that is why send good money after bad. No. I just hope he feels better after a steak dinner. Either that or the wings fall off his plane." He smiled wistfully at the thought. "Oh, well," he said, "let's go to bed."

They went their separate ways, but only Eric went to bed. His father entered the library, sat down, got his pipe going, and began to reread How to Win Friends and Influence People.

* * * * *

The next day saw Dr. Brinton contemplate suicide, homicide, and voting Republican, though not necessarily in that order. The Senator had viewed their most inspiring onward-and-upward movies and merely asked how much they cost to make. He had eaten a huge steak at the commissary, and then inspected the garbage cans for waste. His visits to various departments had been marred by his lack of interest in anything except the number of men employed by each and their average salaries, though he did comment that they all looked hung-over. In the Fuels Department, he had walked out on the demonstrations, interrupting some actual experiments that were going on outside the test room.

Dr. Brinton was now riding in the back of a jeep, explaining to the Senator that nuclear rockets were not too efficient, and the shielding necessary to make them safe for men weighed more than their payload. The Senator noted down the word "inefficient."

A loudspeaker on a pole a little farther down the road interrupted the explanation. "Twenty-five, twenty-five, twenty-five," it shouted. "Five-nine, eighteen. Five-nine, eighteen. Seventy-three, ten-eight." It began to repeat the message.

The driver, who had slowed while they listened to the message, turned

the jeep around and sped them back the other way.

"What in Heaven's name was that?" asked the Senator, who was busy hanging on.

"Twenty-five means emergency," shouted Dr. Brinton. "Five and nine is fire and explosion in the Fuels Department, which is eighteen. Seventy-three is my call number and ten-eight means they want me to get there in a hurry."

For the first time, the Senator looked impressed. Then he grew angry again when his hat blew off and the driver wouldn't stop to go back and get it. The jeep took a shortcut across the concrete fence, and left tire marks in the grass in front of the Fuels Department. Dr. Brinton jumped out and ran into the building, leaving the Senator to argue with the driver about going back for the hat.

The lab outside the test room was dusty and littered with broken glass. Two technicians were receiving first aid for minor cuts, but everyone else seemed to be in an almost holiday mood.

Dr. Ferber saw Dr. Brinton standing in the doorway and came over to him immediately.

"That telephone operator gets too excited," he said. "There's no fire, and I think it was an implosion, not an explosion. Wrecked our new pressure catalyzer. Harrison's gone to hospital and the two you see are hurt, but none of it's very serious. I suppose Butcher Boy is going to put this down in his little notebook, too."

"If you are referring to me," said the Senator's voice behind them, "I most certainly am going to make a note of it. And I suggest you both start advertising for other jobs."

* * * * *

Brinton had been indulging in a pleasant little fantasy in which he had cut Senator MacNeill up into twenty-eight pieces, placed them in aluminum cans, and made them radioactive in the Station pile. He was smiling at the newsreel cameras, about to fire the first Senator-powered spaceship in the history of mankind, when his alarm clock, which had maliciously been waiting for just such an opportunity, spoiled his dream by waking him up.

That was how the next day started. It continued in the same vein when, in a fit of petulance, he strode into his clothes closet and kicked the alarm control box, barefoot. He was working the combination dial for the third or fourth time when he noticed that his feet were getting wet. His kick must have jammed some relays in the control box; the bath water was overflowing. Since the box was sealed to prevent him from fooling with it, he had had to prevent a flood by limping downstairs and pulling the master switch.

With no electricity, his breakfast consisted of cold fruit juice, cold cereal, and cold milk. When he got to his office, he ordered a pot of coffee and made out a requisition for a pipe wrench. If it ever happened again, he was going to shut the water off instead.

His secretary came in with the coffee and poured him a cup.

"I have some letters for you to sign," she said brightly, to cheer him up. Dr. Brinton drank his coffee. "Our new filing system is working very well," she added, pouring him another cup. The doctor's face relaxed a little, but it was because the snow bank in his stomach was beginning to melt. His secretary played her trump. "And somebody from the Fuels Department phoned and said something was passing the yellow line and might make the blue."

She was never sure afterward whether Dr. Brinton had gone around his desk, or over it. She had blinked and by the time her eyes were open again, he was gone.

Dr. Brinton found a crowd in the indoor test lab, chuckling over the line being drawn by a differential analyzer. He elbowed his way to the front, looked himself, and began a little dance of impatience. The analyzer was connected with linkages to the test stand where a tiny rocket motor was thrusting out a hot blue pencil of flame. The results from the analyzer were plotted as range capability against time on a piece of graph paper which had four curved colored lines overprinted on it. The curved lines were marked in succession: "Earth," "Moon," "Moon" and "Earth."

If the first Earth line, colored red, was passed, the fuel under test could power a rocket to leave Earth, carrying men with it. If the yellow line--the first Moon line--was reached, the rocket could theoretically land men on the Moon. Several rockets, carrying dummy loads, had already tried and failed: their fuels, though the best available, barely reached the yellow line when under test.

The blue--second--Moon line was calculated to indicate an escape from, the Moon without refueling, and the last line, in green, was a theoretical powered landing back on Earth.

The pen of the analyzer had already passed the blue line and was more than halfway to the green!

* * * * *

"This the stuff that was left in the catalyzer after the explosion yesterday!" Dr. Ferber shouted to Dr. Brinton over the roar from the little engine. "It looked as if it would burn, so I tested it. Jackpot!"

"What is it?" asked Dr. Brinton.

"Supposed to be an artificial base for a _perfume_!"

The last word seemed louder because the test rocket just then ran out of fuel and grew silent. The tracing of the pen stopped a fraction short of the green line.

Dr. Ferber continued in his normal voice while he busied himself with the connections of the engine: "We didn't have anything to do to put on a show for MacNeill yesterday, so I told the lads to carry on with experiments of their own. It was Harrison who made this stuff. He was cut by flying glass and landed in the hospital. I phoned there this morning and found the damn fool doctor took his appendix out. Said he figured he might as well while Harrison was in there. He's still under

the anesthetic and we won't be able to ask him anything for several hours."

"Doesn't matter," said Dr. Brinton. "We know it works; we have to find out why it works. Got any left? We'll analyze it."

The next few hours saw Dr. Brinton rapidly become a bitter and disillusioned man.

When a qualitative test informed them that the presence of nitrogen meant they were going to have to use an even longer and more laborious process than the ordinary one, he uttered a few sentences that made a couple of nearby German exchange students wonder if perhaps they hadn't a portion missed in the English language learning.

When he found that he had forgotten his pipe at home, and the analysis required too much of their attention to allow him to go home and get it, he quoted a paragraph or two that earned him the undivided attention of everyone in the lab.

But when he took the results over to a calculator and worked them out to carbon 281.6% he had barely started the prologue when frustration overtook him and he subsided, speechless. He was at a loss to say or do anything except mumble that 281.6% was impossible.

* * * * *

Dr. Ferber came over and took the paper with the results from him. Everyone in the lab watched while he checked the calculations patiently.

A delegation minutely checked the apparatus the two doctors had used; it was faultless. One person even went so far as to cast a suspicious look at the big automatic micro-balance standing on its pedestal in the center of the room. He weighed a piece of paper, wrote his name on it in pencil and reweighed it. The difference was satisfactory. For a few moments, they all just stood and looked at each other. Then the whole lot of them set to work.

A junior technician headed for the spectrograph, came back in three minutes with a freshly developed spectral photograph and a puzzled look. He spent some time comparing both of them with the illustrations in a manual entitled _Structural Formulae as Indicated by Spectral Groupings_.

The two German exchange students made a few tries at finding the class of compound. They soon were deep in a technical discussion in their own language, the only recognizable words being "biuret," "dumkopf," and "damn."

A senior research-chemist tried crystalizing some and invented an entirely new swear word.

With four helpers, Dr. Brinton and Dr. Ferber redid the combustion analysis in slightly less than twice the time it would have taken only one of them. Of course they were assured of accuracy; each step was checked at least twice by everyone.

The result was still carbon 281.6%.

Dr. Brinton escaped the ensuing mental paralysis since he had already been through the experience once. He went over and began to study the figures written in on the side of the spectral photograph. Out of little more than idle curiosity, he compared the ratios of the rough quantitative estimate found spectrographically with the more accurate but impossible answer of the combustion micro-analysis.

While he was doing the necessary figuring, he listened sympathetically to the technician. The young man was complaining bitterly about things in general, and chemistry in particular. Chemical reference books came in for a special roasting, because: "either that lousy book is incomplete, or this structural formula is out of this world."

That did it.

Brinton got out a scratch pad and drew a little diagram.

Then he went to talk to Dr. Ferber.

"Would it be possible that Harrison started with a multi-ringed phenol?" he asked. Dr. Ferber nodded. Dr. Brinton showed him the drawing. "Does that remind you of any geometrical figure?"

Dr. Ferber looked. There was a pause, then his eyes lit up.

"Of course," he said. "Since formulae are usually drawn in one plane, I doubt if anyone ever noticed that before. And when it comes under stress by compression, it's only natural that it should fold." He paused and looked at the calendar, "Four weeks?" he asked.

"That'll do fine," said Dr. Brinton. "I'll arrange the details. You look after the fuel. Harrison can give us the details of this one, but there are probably any number of fuels based on this principal. Some will be even more efficient, too."

He excused himself, went to a phone, and asked for a Washington number. The call was answered.

"Hello, Senator MacNeill?" he said. "How would you like to be guest of honor at a party?"

* * * * *

Brinton peered through the ring of reporters over to the head table where Senator MacNeill was speaking, and speaking, and speaking.

"He's on his home state," Dr. Brinton said. "About half an hour to go. Now, gentlemen, you were asking about the new fuel. You all received press handouts containing the information. You will probably receive copies of the Senator's speech. And the broadcast from our first men on the Moon went out over several networks hours ago. It seems to me that you have enough for several stories."

One of the reporters asked bewilderedly, "What is a tesseract? I read the handout twice and I still don't understand."

"A mathematician would be better qualified to explain," said Dr. Brinton, "but I'll try. A tesseract is a fourth dimensional cube. A

line has one dimension, a square has two, a cube has three, and a tesseract has four. A cube can be unfolded into six squares, and a tesseract unfolds to eight cubes. The new fuel had a molecular structure resembling an unfolded tesseract. When pressure is applied, it folds up into a tesseract so that it takes up less room and relieves the pressure.

"The practical application is that we can get eight pounds of it into a one pound can. The other seven pounds of it are riding around in the fourth dimension. As soon as it starts to burn, the structure is destroyed, so that it comes back out of the fourth dimension. Several people have assured me that it can't work. They're probably right, except that it does. Oh, I'll be back in a minute."

He went over to another group and spoke to one of its members. The man addressed nodded his head and left. Dr. Brinton returned.

"If there are no more questions, I suggest we do some serious drinking. I am now out of a job and I want to celebrate."

* * * * *

Promptly at seven-thirty, a relay clicked and the alarm clock went into its usual daily routine with the chimes, window, lights, and bath water.

Dr. Brinton woke up enough to reach out a lazy arm and flip a newly installed toggle switch beside his bed. Everything returned to normal. The light and the chimes both faded away, the window reopened, and a soft gurgling came from the bathroom.

A slight gurgling also came from the bed, where Dr. Brinton, with a happy little smile on his face, had gone peacefully back to sleep, perfectly satisfied that he had worked himself into unemployment by finding the fuel that would power spaceships to--and from--any part of the Solar System.

--=JACK McKENTY=

* * * * *

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Wheels Within

By CHARLES DE VET

Never ask "Who am I and where do I come from?" The answers may not be what you'd expect!

Illustrated by DON SIBLEY

* * * * *

"When did the headaches first start?" asked the neurologist, Dr. Hall.

"About six months ago," Bennett replied.

"What is your occupation, Mr. Bennett?"

"I am a contractor."

"Are you happy in your work?"

"Very. I prefer it to any other occupation I know of."

"When your headaches become sufficiently severe, you say that you have hallucinations," Hall said. "Can you describe what you see during those hallucinations?"

"At first I had only the impression that I was in a place completely unlike anything I had ever known," Bennett answered. "But each time my impressions became sharper, and I carried a fairly clear picture when my mind returned to normal the last time. I felt then that I had been in a room in a tall building that towered thousands of feet over a great city. I even remembered that the name of the city was Thone. There were other people in the room with me--one person especially. I remembered her very clearly."

"Her?" Hall asked.

"Yes."

"Was there anything unusual about this woman?"

"Well, yes, there was," Bennett said, after a brief and almost embarrassed pause. "This will sound pretty adolescent, but--"

Hall leaned forward attentively. "It may be relevant. You're not here to be judged, you know; I'm trying to help you."

Bennett nodded and spoke rapidly, as though trying to finish before he could stop himself. "She was a woman who exactly fitted an image I've had in mind for as long as I can remember. She was tall, fair--though brunette--very beautiful, very vivid, very well poised. I seem to have known her all my life, but only in my dreams, from my very earliest ones to the present. She's never changed in all that time."

He halted as suddenly as he had begun to talk, either having nothing more to say, or unwilling to say it.

"Have you ever married, Mr. Bennett?" Hall prodded gently.

"No, I never have." Again, Bennett stopped, adding nothing more to his blunt answer.

"May I ask why not?"

Bennett turned his face away. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask that. It makes me sound like a romantic kid." He looked at the doctor almost in defiance. "I've always felt that some day I would meet this girl, or at least someone very much like her. I know it's not a rational

feeling--maybe I've even used it as an excuse not to get married--but it's like spilling salt and throwing a pinch over our shoulder; we aren't superstitious, yet we don't take any chances."

Dr. Hall didn't comment. He ended the questioning period and put Bennett through a series of tests. Then they sat down again and Hall offered his diagnosis.

"The neurological examination is essentially negative, Mr. Bennett. In other words, there is no organic reason that I can find for your headaches. That leaves only one other possibility--an emotional disturbance. I'm a neurologist, remember, not a psychoanalyst. I can only give an opinion about the cause of your complaint."

Bennett waited expectantly.

"Headaches without organic causes are generally the result of repressed anger," Hall went on. "That anger can stem from any number of traumatic situations or attitudes, all deeply buried in the unconscious, of course, or they would not have the power to hurt us. From what we know of you, however, it seems to be the result of frustration. In other words, you have created a fantasy image of a completely unattainable woman, and therefore none of the women you meet can fulfill your expectations. Since she is unattainable, you naturally feel a sense of frustration."

"But who could she be?" Bennett asked anxiously.

"Someone you knew in childhood, perhaps. A composite of real and imaginary women. Usually, it is an idealized image of your own mother."

Bennett sat frowning. "All right, let's say that's so. But where do the hallucinations of the city of Thone fit in?"

"This is something that has to be tracked down in a series of analytical sessions, so all I can do is guess. If one is unable to reach a goal in a real environment, the obvious answer is to create a fantasy world. That's what you appear to be doing. It's a dangerous situation, Mr. Bennett. Potentially, at least."

"How so?" Bennett asked, alarmed.

"The general tendency is toward greater and greater divorcement from reality. I suggest immediate treatment by a competent analyst. If you don't know of one, I can recommend several."

"I'd like to think it over."

"Do that," Hall said. "And call me when you've decided."

* * * * *

The third day after he consulted the neurologist, Bennett's headache returned. As before, drugs were of no help. When the pain became blinding, he lay back on his bed, placed a cold cloth on his forehead, and closed his eyes.

Suddenly the realities he knew were gone and he was back in the

dream-city of Thone.

Persons and objects were much clearer now. Bennett saw that he lay in a receptacle shaped like a rectangular metal box. It was padded, reminding him unpleasantly of a coffin. The woman he had seen before was again with him, but now he knew that her name was Lima. Behind her stood a man; a tall, dark man whose eyebrows joined over the bridge of his nose, and whose forehead was creased in a permanent frown. The woman held out her arms to Bennett. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Bennett's spirit seemed to rise from the flesh--he could see his body still lying there--and he followed the woman. As he approached she retreated and, try as he would to reach her, she remained just beyond his grasp.

After what seemed hours of futile pursuit, a cloud formed between him and the woman. When it dissipated, he had left the world of Thone. He was in a trolley-bus, in his own world, and vaguely he recalled having left his room, gone down to the street, and boarded the trolley--during the time he had followed Lima, in his hallucination. It seemed that he had a definite destination then, but now he could not recall what it had been.

His attention was drawn to the outside by the flickering of lights that flashed in through the bus windows. Bennett looked out and saw that he was in the Pleasure Section of the city, traveling through the Street of Carnivals. He watched the fronts of the amusement buildings pass before him and he read their advertisements listlessly.

Suddenly one sign seemed to spring out from all the others:

LIMA
MYSTIC OF THE MIND

He left the trolley at the next corner and made his way through the crowd to the brightly lit carnival building.

Inside, he found a chair and seated himself. The show's act appeared about half over. It was pretty evidently charlatan stuff, Bennett decided, but the black-hooded mystic on the stage held his attention. She was a tall woman, with a slender figure and fair flesh. She was poised, or perhaps it was indifference to the crowd.

A runner went through the audience touching articles of clothing or ornaments, and the woman without hesitation named each one he touched. The act was slightly different from most Bennett had seen in that the runner said nothing, merely touching the articles to be named.

The next portion of the show consisted of a mind-reading act. Bennett expected the usual routine of writing a question on paper, which would be sealed in an envelope and placed in a container on the stage.

He was surprised when the runner returned to the crowd and asked for volunteers for thought-reading.

A short man with a bright yellow necktie raised his hand. The runner made his way through the crowd to the man and touched him on the shoulder before turning back to the mystic. He still said nothing.

"This man is thinking that he should have stayed at home tonight," the mystic said. "There are wrestling matches on the teletone, and he would have enjoyed them more than this show. Besides, he would have spent less money that way than he has tonight. And he does not like to spend money unless he must."

A titter of amusement went through the crowd as the man blushed a dull crimson.

The runner touched a second man.

"This man wishes to know the winner in the eighth race at the horse tracks tomorrow," she said. "I am sorry, but, because of Public Law one thousand thirty-two, Section five-A, I am prohibited from answering a question of that nature."

The third person contacted was a woman. She raised her hand, then half changed her mind when she saw that the runner was turning toward her. But then she defiantly tossed her brown hair back from her face and allowed him to touch her shoulder.

"This woman is wondering if her lover is true to her--and if her husband will find out about them."

This time the crowd laughed when the embarrassed woman turned pale and rushed up the aisle toward the exit.

No further hands were raised and the show ended with a short address by the runner: "I hope you have enjoyed these truly marvelous and mysterious demonstrations. Now the mystic, Lima, is available for a short time for personal interviews. The fee is very reasonable--one dollar a minute. Anyone wishing an interview please step forward."

The mystic pulled the hood from her head, smiled, bowed at the crowd, and left the stage.

Bennett gasped.

"The woman of the city of Thone!"

* * * * *

"You have paid in advance for twenty-five minutes of my time," Lima said, as she smiled in amusement. "Perhaps you had better begin your questions, instead of merely staring at me."

Bennett brought his thoughts back with an effort. "Your performance was exceptionally good," he said very soberly. "I enjoyed it. And so, apparently did the other customers. It is a clever routine. I'll admit I can't figure out how you do it."

"Remember what Barnum said," Lima replied lightly.

"At least you do not take yourself too seriously," Bennett observed.

"On the contrary." Lima countered, "I take myself very seriously. You, however, do not. You are paying for my time and the customer is always right."

"Tell me," Bennett asked abruptly, "have we ever met before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Have you any objections to telling me about yourself during our interview? Who are you? What is your background?"

"I will be glad to tell you about myself, if you think it will be interesting," she replied, after a barely perceptible pause. "How I came by this exceptional ability of mine, I have no slightest conception. I only remember that when I was young, and still without the intellect to evaluate social mores and customs, I was often placed in positions of awkwardness by my ability to read minds. At an early age, however, through the council of my parents, I learned to keep this knowledge to myself.

"By the time I reached my twentieth birthday, my parents were both dead and I was alone in the world. I had never learned any occupation. I made some attempts to use my mind-reading to some advantage to myself, but soon found that I encountered the opposition of the medical associations as well as the law. As a consequence, I turned to show business as the one means of earning a legitimate livelihood. There is not much more to tell."

"Can you actually read minds?" Bennett asked insistently.

"I can."

"Then what am I thinking now?"

"You are thinking," Lima said, with no semblance of a trance or any of the other usual antics of professional mystics, "that I look exactly like a woman you have never seen, but whose image you have carried in your mind since your childhood."

For just a moment, the startling accuracy disconcerted Bennett.

"I have a problem which is quite annoying," he pushed on almost frantically. "Can you tell me what my problem is?"

"You have been subject to extremely severe headaches, which you have been unable to remedy, either by sedatives or with the help of a neurologist. Am I correct?"

"More than you could possibly know! Look, I came here believing you were a fake. That didn't matter--it was the fact that you looked like this other woman that counted. I'm convinced now. I want your help. Can you help me, or at least tell me whether the neurologist is right about the cause of my headaches?"

"He is wrong," Lima said. "I can tell you what causes them, but I am afraid that I will have to ask for another hundred dollars for that extra service."

Bennett was momentarily irritated at this evidence that their relationship, at least as far as she was concerned, was strictly business. But he shrugged off the feeling. He drew five twenty-dollar bills from his pocketbook and placed them on the table before her.

"If you remember," Lima said, folding the money carefully and tucking it into the neck of her dress, "five months ago a building which you had contracted to build fell, when it was nearly completed, and two workmen were killed."

"I remember very well."

"You found that the collapse of the building was caused by faulty material which you had bought through a subcontractor. You are still investigating to determine where to place the blame, and are on the point of doing so."

"Go on," Bennett breathed softly.

"You are quite certain that the person responsible is John Tournay, ostensibly a reputable contractor, but actually an unscrupulous scoundrel. You have a choice of exposing him, with great personal danger to yourself--Tournay is a dangerous and ruthless man--or remaining silent and knowing that you are a coward. The difficulty of that choice is causing your headaches."

"You may be right," Bennett admitted without hesitation. "I haven't had time to think the matter through quite that far. What would you advise me to do?"

"That is something which cannot be advised. The answer lies within yourself. You are either a big enough man to do the right thing--which you yourself recognize--or you are a small man and will take the safer, less honorable course. The decision and the integrity lie within yourself."

* * * * *

Bennett slumped. "I see that. Then there's nothing more that you can do for me?"

"But there is," Lima replied. "I can cure your headaches, if you wish--for an additional hundred dollars."

"That would be a cheap price." Bennett drew his wallet from his pocket. "My cash is rather low. Would you accept a personal check?"

"Certainly," Lima said. "But, first, let me explain about my cure. There is some mental unpleasantness involved which you may consider worse than the ailment."

"I doubt that. I can't imagine anything worse than this agony."

"Your mind will be placed under my control and led through a dream sequence. I will follow a logical progression of events, using your actual past as background. While you are under my control, your experiences will be far from pleasant. I will allow your mind to follow its own anticipated course of events, influencing your thoughts only slightly--directing them into as unpleasant channels as possible. In fact, to make the cure certain, at least the culmination must be quite devastating. Do you agree to undergo such rigorous mental punishment?"

"But why do I have to?" Bennett asked, astonished and worried.

"That pattern will act in the manner of a counter-irritant. Your mind is like a spoiled child, rejecting anticipated unpleasantness. Under my influence it is subjected to possible alternative experiences, which are so much worse than the one it originally feared that it will gratefully accept the lesser evil."

"That sounds reasonable," Bennett agreed. "When could we begin this treatment?"

"Immediately, if you are willing."

"I see no reason for waiting."

"Then, if you are ready," Lima told him, "lie on this couch. Keep your eyes on mine." She spoke slowly, evenly. "Remember that you are doing this of your own free will, that you trust me. I am your friend and would do you no harm."

Her voice droned on as Bennett looked into her eyes. They merged until they became one large, placid pool of restfulness, and he found himself drawn into them.

He sank peacefully, quietly--completely.

* * * * *

When the telephone rang, Bennett knew it was the district attorney returning his call, and that the die was cast. Until this ugly business was brought to a conclusion, his life would be in constant danger.

"Leroy Bennett speaking," he said. "I have had collected some information that I think will be of very great interest to your office."

"Information about what?" the voice at the other end asked briskly.

"I have proof that John Tournay is responsible for the death of two men, in an action involving criminal collusion."

"If what you say is true, I will be glad to see your evidence," the district attorney said. "Could you deliver it in person? There may be some questions I would like to ask you about it."

"Certainly," Bennett replied. "When would be the most convenient time?"

"Later in the day. I have a case going on. How would four-thirty this afternoon suit you?"

"That would be fine."

The rest of the day dragged slowly. At four o'clock Bennett left his office and took the elevator to the ground floor. Under his arm he clutched the briefcase which might spell death for him.

A moment after he left his office building, he knew he had made a

mistake--a fatal one!

Idly, at first, his mind's eye watched the driver of a long gray sedan, parked at the curb, start up its motor as he approached. The car pulled away from the curb when he came alongside it.

Through an open rear window, Bennett saw a man with a dark, brooding face--with black eyebrows that joined over the bridge of the nose--glowering at him. At the same instant he saw the blunt nose of an automatic resting on the lowered glass of the window, just below the chin of the frowning man.

Incredibly, even as he realized that he was about to die, Bennett's first thought was not one of fear, but rather that this dark man was the other person he had seen in his hallucinations of the city of Thone!

Then, as one part of his mind drew back in terror at what it knew was about to happen, another part wondered at the mystery of Thone and the people in it. Where did that hallucination fit in this mist of life which was about to end?

He felt three hard, solid blows punch shockingly into his body. There was pain, but greater than that was the terror that whipped his panicked mind.

"Lima," Bennett whispered with his last stark thought as he dropped to his knees.

He groped for the sidewalk with one hand, to steady himself, and never reached it.

* * * * *

"It's over now," Bennett heard the mystic say. "Please try to relax."

He found himself fighting with awful exertion to raise himself from the sidewalk--which had turned into a couch. His clothes clung to him with a clammy wetness that chilled him.

He flung his arms out in a frantic gesture that knocked a lamp from an end-table and sent it crashing to the floor.

Not until then did he feel the mystic's firmly gentle hands on his shoulders, urging him down, and know that he was not actually dying. He lay back for a moment, gasping great gulps of welcome air into his lungs.

"I think you will be all right now," Lima said.

"You were right when you said the experience would not be pleasant," Bennett said, still battling for breath. "I hope the results will be worth it."

"I believe you will find that they are," Lima told him reassuringly. "Also, it can be of assistance to you in still another way. The sequence your dream followed--being a natural, perhaps even a probable, aftermath of your past decisions and movements--could actually happen. Therefore it would be wise to avoid such decisions

in real life."

* * * * *

At the end of two weeks, Bennett had collected all the information he needed on Tournay's illegal activities. The investigator he hired was very thorough, and unearthed several other incriminating schemes in Tournay's past. With the evidence he had on hand, Bennett was certain that Tournay would be convicted in any court.

This time he intended to evade the fate he had suffered in the dream by acting differently. He hired a shrewd lawyer--the best obtainable--had him draw up the evidence in legal form, and presented it to the district attorney, with the demand for Tournay's immediate arrest. He knew that immediate action would be his best protection.

That evening, when he left his office building, he felt the peace of a man whose task has been well done.

It took almost a full second before the sight of the long gray car jerked his thoughts from their pleasant introspection and back to dread reality. Tournay's black-browed face leered at him as it had in the dream and he felt his body tense as it waited for the pistol slugs to strike.

His mind scurried in its trap within his head and, strangely, it turned to the mystic for help.

"Lima!" he called desperately.

* * * * *

Again Bennett felt himself struggling with that awful exertion to drag his body from the couch on which it lay.

"It's all over now," he heard Lima say.

He sat up. "What happened?"

"This will be hard to believe," Lima said, "and I will not try to prove it to you, but it is true. The mind has many powers which cannot even be imagined by anyone who has not lived with those powers as I have. When you called me, your mind attuned itself with mine, and its need and its demand were so powerful that together we turned time backward. You are now back in my dressing room, and it is the exact time at which you originally came out of your dream."

"That's impossible!" Bennett protested.

"Nevertheless, it happened. I only ask you to keep in mind one thing. Someday, when your mind has been made more facile, you will understand how I am able to do this. It will even appear logical to you. Now, however, the only thing I can tell you is _believe it_!"

* * * * *

Bennett had no intention of mulling this second chance. After he had collected the information about Tournay's criminal activities, he also dug into his past for a man who had cause to hate the contractor.

He found the man he sought, a man as ruthless and unscrupulous as Tournay himself, one who could fight him on his own ground.

Roger Clarkson had been the controller of a string of bookie joints, before he had been framed by Tournay, and convicted, to serve ten years in prison.

Clarkson had been released from prison six days before. He found that Tournay had gained control of his former criminal empire. Everyone, including Tournay, knew that the only thing preventing Clarkson from taking revenge was the opportunity.

Bennett sent his information to Clarkson and sat back to await the results. That evening, as he was about to leave his office building, some inner caution warned him to take no chances. He stepped cautiously out into the street, looked both ways for the gray sedan, and saw that the street was empty, before he walked to the corner.

He arrived there just in time to meet the long gray sedan as it drove up.

* * * * *

Once more he fought the awful exertion on the mystic's couch. This time he came out of the blackness with his mind clear. "You've saved me again," he said to Lima. "Have you turned time backward again?"

"Yes," she replied. "But I have given you all the help I can. The next attempt you make, you will have nothing on which to lean except your own strength."

"But why do I always arrive at the point where I'm being shot by Tournay, regardless of what course I choose? Is there no way I can beat him?"

"If you believe in fate as strongly as I do, you will accept that conclusion as inevitable. The long gray sedan is the symbol of your death. You cannot avoid it--at least not as long as you persist in passive action."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just this. You wish to see Tournay punished--your sense of justice demands it. But each time you try to have someone else administer that punishment. It appears to me that the only possibility of your breaking this fateful progression of events is for you to administer the punishment yourself. You probably realize the danger of trying that. But I can't see where you have any other choice."

"In other words, you feel that the only chance I have of preventing Tournay from killing me--is to kill him first?"

"Yes," Lima said. "Are you strong and hard enough to do it?"

Bennett thought for only a brief moment before he nodded. "I'm desperate enough, at any rate."

This time he did not leave immediately. He had to find out something first. He put his arms around Lima's shoulders and drew her toward

him. She put her face up and he kissed her waiting lips. They were sweet and, if she did not return the ardor of his kiss, he did not notice it.

* * * * *

"Mr. Tournay is not in," the girl at the desk told Bennett. "You might try his home."

At a pay-booth in the lobby, Bennett called Tournay's home. The voice that answered was that of a tired woman, one who has given up hope. "Mr. Tournay called me a short time ago and said that he would be in the office of a Mr. Leroy Bennett, in the Lowry building, if anyone called," the tired voice said.

Bennett hung up and caught a cab. His quarry had walked into an ideal place for their meeting. For better or for worse, he would soon bring this conflict to an end.

In his office, Bennett found that Tournay had been there and gone. He had left a message: "Tell Mr. Bennett that Lima sent me!"

So that was it--Lima had used Bennett as a dupe! He could not figure out her purpose, but he knew that he could never trust her again. She had been against him from the first. Perhaps even she, rather than Tournay, was the prime menace. He decided that he must kill them both, before they had the chance to kill him. Touching the small flat pistol snuggling in its shoulder holster, he knew the pursuit must continue immediately.

He rode the elevator to the ground floor, and he felt his mind working with a clarity and a precision which he had seldom experienced before. This time he knew he would win.

Shrewdly, before leaving the building, Bennett looked out through the glass pane in the door first. He waited only a moment before he saw the long gray sedan as he had expected. They would not trap him again. Ducking back, he walked rapidly toward a side exit.

Night had fallen by the time he reached the carnival building. He did not ring the bell. Instead, he walked to the rear, climbed the stairs of a fire-escape, and softly opened the window of a bedroom.

He stepped inside just as softly and stood listening for breathing. He heard none. This was probably too early for Lima to be in bed.

The bedroom door was open. Bennett could see a light coming from another part of the apartment--probably the living room. He paused to steel himself for what he must do. The time had come when he would have to be savagely ruthless.

He found Lima sitting on a couch, reading a book. He suspected that she still had some control over his mind and he had no intention of letting her influence him. She must be killed before she could read his intention.

"It didn't work." Bennett spoke just loudly enough to startle Lima into raising her head.

As she looked up, he shot her squarely between the eyes.

In an agony of frustration, Bennett saw the flesh of her forehead remain clear and undisturbed. He knew he could not miss at this range, yet she was unhurt. He lowered his sights and shot at the white neck beneath the fair head. She still sat there, returning his gaze, unperturbed, unmarked by the bullets.

He pumped the four remaining bullets into her body. The only part of her that moved was her lips.

"It's no use, Leroy," she said. "Haven't you guessed? You are still in your dream. You can't kill me there."

Suddenly the implication struck him with its awful simplicity.

"Good God!" His voice rose. "Do you mean I've never been out of my dream?" He hesitated while the thought sank in. "My remembrance of coming out of it was only part of the dream itself," he murmured. "That was why you were able to turn time backward at will."

A cold calmness returned to him.

"Tell me," he said, "am I still in the dream?"

"Yes," Lima replied.

"Then I demand that you free me now!"

"As you wish," Lima said sadly. "And may God help you."

Bennett wrenched his body from the couch on which it lay and struggled to his feet. Though the dream had seemed real enough, he could look back on it now and see it as any other dream.

He breathed easier, and then stopped abruptly when he heard a voice behind him say, "You are still a dead man!"

Bennett whirled and found himself facing Tournay. And Tournay held a pistol aimed at his heart.

Bennett turned desperately back to Lima. His lips formed her name, but the sound died almost before it was uttered. This time, he saw, she would not help him. Her features had hardened and no mercy or compassion registered on them.

[Illustration]

"There is no escape," she said.

A fleeting thought went through his mind of springing at Tournay and trying to reach him before the gun could be fired. But one glance at Tournay's face made him realize how futile--and fatal--that would be.

Tournay's finger tightened on the trigger of his gun and Bennett thought ahead in despair to what was to come. One thing he knew: He did not want to die! Was there no way out?

The answer came like a cry of relief. There was a way--Thone! The city

of his enigma. Tournay and Lima could not harm him there.

* * * * *

For just an instant, Bennett's vision blurred. Time paused, and the next moment he knew he had returned to Thone. The sounds of the alien city floated up to him and he stirred.

He grasped the sides of his coffinlike bed with fingers that had lost their sense of touch. He pulled himself up to a sitting position and looked about him. On one side stood Lima, though now her features were not those of the implacable, merciless mystic, but rather those of a woman in love.

She smiled happily and said, "At last you have returned."

Bennett strove to move his tongue and lips to ask questions, but they refused, as though numbed by long inaction. He turned to his other side and gazed questioningly at the replica of Tournay who stood there.

Tournay's image spoke. "We had quite a time bringing you back, Sire. But now it has been accomplished--for good."

Striving to move his throat muscles, Bennett finally forced a sound, and then words, through his lips.

"Tell me," he pleaded. "Who are you? And, more important, who am I?"

He turned to Lima for an answer, realizing that now she would help him if anyone would.

"Doctor Tournay will explain it to you," Lima replied, indicating the dark man.

Imploringly, Bennett turned back to face Tournay.

"I see that very little of your memory has returned yet," Tournay said. "In a short while, everything--all your past--will come back to you. Until then, perhaps I had better explain to you who you are. My words will help trigger your returning memory, and speed up the process."

"Please do," Bennett begged.

"You are Benn Ett, _Le Roy_ of the city-state of Thone, in the year 4526 A. D. Six months ago, the strain of governing the city began to undermine your health. Acting under my advice, you decided to take a somno-rest cure.

"This rest cure," the doctor continued, "is quite standard practice in our time. We had a little difficulty bringing you out of it at the end of six months. Evidently your somno-existence must have been very pleasant."

"Do you mean that the existence I remember was merely an induced figment of my imagination?"

"Yes. You see, the best rest that can be given a mind is to give it

not sleep, but pleasant work. Therefore, under my manipulation, you were given a pseudo-existence in a past era of history. You were led to conceive yourself as occupying a position, which, after close study, I deduced would be the most suitable and relaxing for you."

"But if that is true, why did my dream have to end so unpleasantly--I might say, so nearly fatally?" Bennett demanded.

"The more successful I am in choosing a pleasant existence for a patient in the somno, the more difficult it is to bring him out of it," the doctor replied. "Your unconscious mind, realizing how happy you were in your simulated existence, and how it would have to return to the rigor and stress which unnerved it before, fought with all its strength to remain where the somno had placed it.

"The usual practice in bringing a patient back to reality is for the doctor to enter the dream and convince him, by whatever means may be necessary, to return. Sometimes, however, the patient is so firmly tied to his somno-existence that drastic measures must be used. This is usually done by means of making the somno-existence so anxiety-producing that the patient is glad to return.

"Your particular release was one of the most difficult that I have ever encountered. In fact, I was unable to bring you back myself, and asked your wife, Lima, to enter the somno with me and help force you to return."

Bits of recollection, which had been edging into Bennett's memory, burst through in full force, and he remembered. It was true. He _was_ Benn Ett, _Le Roy_ of the city-state of Thone.

He turned to Lima and, as he read the glad light in her eyes, he knew that she had witnessed the return of his complete memory.

"Welcome home," she said.

--CHARLES V. DE VET

* * * * *

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THE HATED

By PAUL FLEHR

_After space, there was always
one more river to cross ... the
far side of hatred and murder!_

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

The bar didn't have a name. No name of any kind. Not even an indication that it had ever had one. All it said on the outside was:

Cafe
EAT
Cocktails

which doesn't make a lot of sense. But it was a bar. It had a big TV set going ya-ta-ta ya-ta-ta in three glorious colors, and a jukebox that tried to drown out the TV with that lousy music they play. Anyway, it wasn't a kid hangout. I kind of like it. But I wasn't supposed to be there at all; it's in the contract. I was supposed to stay in New York and the New England states.

Cafe-EAT- Cocktails_ was right across the river. I think the name of the place was Hoboken, but I'm not sure. It all had a kind of dreamy feeling to it. I was--

Well, I couldn't even remember going there. I remembered one minute I was downtown New York, looking across the river. I did that a lot. And then I was there. I don't remember crossing the river at all.

I was drunk, you know.

* * * * *

You know how it is? Double bourbons and keep them coming. And after a while the bartender stops bringing me the ginger ale because gradually I forget to mix them. I got pretty loaded long before I left New York. I realize that. I guess I had to get pretty loaded to risk the pension and all.

Used to be I didn't drink much, but now, I don't know, when I have one drink, I get to thinking about Sam and Wally and Chowderhead and Gilvey and the captain. If I don't drink, I think about them, too, and then I take a drink. And that leads to another drink, and it all comes out to the same thing. Well, I guess I said it already, I drink a pretty good amount, but you can't blame me.

There was a girl.

I always get a girl someplace. Usually they aren't much and this one wasn't either. I mean she was probably somebody's mother. She was around thirty-five and not so bad, though she had a long scar under her ear down along her throat to the little round spot where her larynx was. It wasn't ugly. She smelled nice--while I could still smell, you know--and she didn't talk much. I liked that. Only--

Well, did you ever meet somebody with a nervous cough? Like when you say something funny--a little funny, not a big yock--they don't laugh and they don't stop with just smiling, but they sort of cough? She did that. I began to itch. I couldn't help it. I asked her to stop it.

She spilled her drink and looked at me almost as though she was scared--and I had tried to say it quietly, too.

"Sorry," she said, a little angry, a little scared. "_Sorry._ But you don't have to--"

"Forget it."

"Sure. But you asked me to sit down here with you, remember? If you're going to--"

"_Forget it!_" I nodded at the bartender and held up two fingers. "You need another drink," I said. "The thing is," I said, "Gilvey used to do

that."

"What?"

"That cough."

She looked puzzled. "You mean like this?"

"_Goddam it, stop it!_" Even the bartender looked over at me that time. Now she was really mad, but I didn't want her to go away. I said, "Gilvey was a fellow who went to Mars with me. Pat Gilvey."

"_Oh._" She sat down again and leaned across the table, low. "_Mars._"

* * * * *

The bartender brought our drinks and looked at me suspiciously. I said, "Say, Mac, would you turn down the air-conditioning?"

"My name isn't Mac. No."

"Have a heart. It's too cold in here."

"Sorry." He didn't sound sorry.

I was cold. I mean that kind of weather, it's always cold in those places. You know around New York in August? It hits eighty, eighty-five, ninety. All the places have air-conditioning and what they really want is for you to wear a shirt and tie.

But I like to walk a lot. You would, too, you know. And you can't walk around much in long pants and a suit coat and all that stuff. Not around there. Not in August. And so then, when I went into a bar, it'd have one of those built-in freezers for the used-car salesmen with their dates, or maybe their wives, all dressed up. For what? But I froze.

"_Mars_," the girl breathed. "_Mars._"

I began to itch again. "Want to dance?"

"They don't have a license," she said. "Byron, _I_ didn't know you'd been to _Mars_! Please _tell_ me about it."

"It was all right," I said.

That was a lie.

She was interested. She forgot to smile. It made her look nicer. She said, "I knew a man--my brother-in-law--he was my husband's brother--I mean my ex-husband--"

"I get the idea."

"He worked for General Atomic. In Rockford, Illinois. You know where that is?"

"Sure." I couldn't go there, but I knew where Illinois was.

"He worked on the first Mars ship. Oh, fifteen years ago, wasn't it? He

always wanted to go himself, but he couldn't pass the tests." She stopped and looked at me.

I knew what she was thinking. But I didn't always look this way, you know. Not that there's anything wrong with me now, I mean, but I couldn't pass the tests any more. Nobody can. That's why we're all one-trippers.

I said, "The only reason I'm shaking like this is because I'm cold."

It wasn't true, of course. It was that cough of Gilvey's. I didn't like to think about Gilvey, or Sam or Chowderhead or Wally or the captain. I didn't like to think about any of them. It made me shake.

You see, we couldn't kill each other. They wouldn't let us do that. Before we took off, they did something to our minds to make sure. What they did, it doesn't last forever. It lasts for two years and then it wears off. That's long enough, you see, because that gets you to Mars and back; and it's plenty long enough, in another way, because it's like a strait-jacket.

You know how to make a baby cry? Hold his hands. It's the most basic thing there is. What they did to us so we couldn't kill each other, it was like being tied up, like having our hands held so we couldn't get free. Well. But two years was long enough. Too long.

The bartender came over and said, "Pal, I'm sorry. See, I turned the air-conditioning down. You all right? You look so--"

I said, "Sure, I'm all right."

He sounded worried. I hadn't even heard him come back. The girl was looking worried, too, I guess because I was shaking so hard I was spilling my drink. I put some money on the table without even counting it.

"It's all right," I said. "We were just going."

"We were?" She looked confused. But she came along with me. They always do, once they find out you've been to Mars.

* * * * *

In the next place, she said, between trips to the powder room, "It must take a lot of courage to sign up for something like that. Were you scientifically inclined in school? Don't you have to know an awful lot to be a space-flyer? Did you ever see any of those little monkey characters they say live on Mars? I read an article about how they lived in little cities of pup-tents or something like that--only they didn't make them, they grew them. Funny! Ever see those? That trip must have been a real drag, I bet. What is it, nine months? You couldn't have a baby! Excuse me-- Say, tell me. All that time, how'd you--well, manage things? I mean didn't you ever have to go to the you-know or anything?"

"We managed," I said.

She giggled, and that reminded her, so she went to the powder room again. I thought about getting up and leaving while she was gone, but what was the use of that? I'd only pick up somebody else.

It was nearly midnight. A couple of minutes wouldn't hurt. I reached in my pocket for the little box of pills they give us--it isn't refillable, but we get a new prescription in the mail every month, along with the pension check. The label on the box said:

CAUTION

Use only as directed by physician. Not to be taken by persons suffering heart condition, digestive upset or circulatory disease. Not to be used in conjunction with alcoholic beverages.

I took three of them. I don't like to start them before midnight, but anyway I stopped shaking.

I closed my eyes, and then I was on the ship again. The noise in the bar became the noise of the rockets and the air washers and the sludge sluicers. I began to sweat, although this place was air-conditioned, too.

I could hear Wally whistling to himself the way he did, the sound muffled by his oxygen mask and drowned in the rocket noise, but still perfectly audible. The tune was _Sophisticated Lady_. Sometimes it was _Easy to Love_ and sometimes _Chasing Shadows_, but mostly _Sophisticated Lady_. He was from Juilliard.

Somebody sneezed, and it sounded just like Chowderhead sneezing. You know how everybody sneezes according to his own individual style? Chowderhead had a ladylike little sneeze; it went _hutta_, real quick, all through the mouth, no nose involved. The captain went _Hrasssh_; Wally was Ashoo, ashoo, _ashoo_. Gilvey was _Hutch_-uh. Sam didn't sneeze much, but he sort of coughed and sprayed, and that was worse.

Sometimes I used to think about killing Sam by tying him down and having Wally and the captain sneeze him to death. But that was a kind of a joke, naturally, when I was feeling good. Or pretty good. Usually I thought about a knife for Sam. For Chowderhead it was a gun, right in the belly, one shot. For Wally it was a tommy gun--just stitching him up and down, you know, back and forth. The captain I would put in a cage with hungry lions, and Gilvey I'd strangle with my bare hands. That was probably because of the cough, I guess.

* * * * *

She was back. "Please tell me about it," she begged. "I'm _so_ curious."

I opened my eyes. "You want me to tell you about it?"

"Oh, please!"

"About what it's like to fly to Mars on a rocket?"

"Yes!"

"All right," I said.

It's wonderful what three little white pills will do. I wasn't even shaking.

"There's six men, see? In a space the size of a Buick, and that's all the room there is. Two of us in the bunks all the time, four of us on watch. Maybe you want to stay in the sack an extra ten minutes--because it's the only place on the ship where you can stretch out, you know, the only place where you can rest without somebody's elbow in your side. But you can't. Because by then it's the next man's turn.

"And maybe you don't have elbows in your side while it's your turn off watch, but in the starboard bunk there's the air-regenerator master valve--I bet I could still show you the bruises right around my kidneys--and in the port bunk there's the emergency-escape-hatch handle. That gets you right in the temple, if you turn your head too fast.

"And you can't really sleep, I mean not soundly, because of the noise. That is, when the rockets are going. When they aren't going, then you're in free-fall, and that's bad, too, because you dream about falling. But when they're going, I don't know, I think it's worse. It's pretty loud.

"And even if it weren't for the noise, if you sleep too soundly you might roll over on your oxygen line. Then you dream about drowning. Ever do that? You're strangling and choking and you can't get any air? It isn't dangerous, I guess. Anyway, it always woke me up in time. Though I heard about a fellow in a flight six years ago--

"Well. So you've always got this oxygen mask on, all the time, except if you take it off for a second to talk to somebody. You don't do that very often, because what is there to say? Oh, maybe the first couple of weeks, sure--everybody's friends then. You don't even need the mask, for that matter. Or not very much. Everybody's still pretty clean. The place smells--oh, let's see--about like the locker room in a gym. You know? You can stand it. That's if nobody's got space sickness, of course. We were lucky that way.

"But that's about how it's going to get anyway, you know. Outside the masks, it's soup. It isn't that you smell it so much. You kind of _taste_ it, in the back of your mouth, and your eyes sting. That's after the first two or three months. Later on, it gets worse.

"And with the mask on, of course, the oxygen mixture is coming in under pressure. That's funny if you're not used to it. Your lungs have to work a little bit harder to get rid of it, especially when you're asleep, so after a while the muscles get sore. And then they get sorer. And then--

"Well.

"Before we take off, the psych people give us a long doo-da that keeps us from killing each other. But they can't stop us from thinking about it. And afterward, after we're back on Earth--this is what you won't read about in the articles--they keep us apart. You know how they work it? We get a pension, naturally. I mean there's got to be a pension, otherwise there isn't enough money in the world to make anybody go. But in the contract, it says to get the pension we have to stay in our own area.

[Illustration]

"The whole country's marked off. Six sections. Each has at least one big city in it. I was lucky, I got a lot of them. They try to keep it so every man's home town is in his own section, but--well, like with us,

Chowderhead and the captain both happened to come from Santa Monica. I think it was Chowderhead that got California, Nevada, all that Southwest area. It was the luck of the draw. God knows what the captain got.

"Maybe New Jersey," I said, and took another white pill.

* * * * *

We went on to another place and she said suddenly, "I figured something out. The way you keep looking around."

"What did you figure out?"

"Well, part of it was what you said about the other fellow getting New Jersey. This is New Jersey. You don't belong in this section, right?"

"Right," I said after a minute.

"So why are you here? I know why. You're here because you're looking for somebody."

"That's right."

She said triumphantly, "You want to find that other fellow from your crew! You want to fight him!"

I couldn't help shaking, white pills or no white pills. But I had to correct her.

"No. I want to kill him."

"How do you know he's here? He's got a lot of states to roam around in, too, doesn't he?"

"Six. New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland--all the way down to Washington."

"Then how do you know--"

"He'll be here." I didn't have to tell her how I knew. But I knew.

I wasn't the only one who spent his time at the border of his assigned area, looking across the river or staring across a state line, knowing that somebody was on the other side. I knew. You fight a war and you don't have to guess that the enemy might have his troops a thousand miles away from the battle line. You know where his troops will be. You know he wants to fight, too.

Hutta. Hutta.

I spilled my drink.

I looked at her. "You--you didn't--"

She looked frightened. "What's the matter?"

"_Did you just sneeze?_"

"Sneeze? Me? Did I--"

I said something quick and nasty, I don't know what. No! It hadn't been her. I knew it.

It was Chowderhead's sneeze.

* * * * *

Chowderhead. Marvin T. Roebuck, his name was. Five feet eight inches tall. Dark-complected, with a cast in one eye. Spoke with a Midwest kind of accent, even though he came from California--"shrick" for "shriek," "hawror" for "horror," like that. It drove me crazy after a while. Maybe that gives you an idea what he talked about mostly. A skunk. A thoroughgoing, deep-rooted, mother-murdering skunk.

I kicked over my chair and roared, "Roebuck! Where are you, damn you?"

The bar was all at once silent. Only the jukebox kept going.

"I know you're here!" I screamed. "Come out and get it! You louse, I told you I'd get you for calling me a liar the day Wally sneaked a smoke!"

Silence, everybody looking at me.

Then the door of the men's room opened.

He came out.

He looked _lousy_. Eyes all red-rimmed and his hair falling out--the poor crumb couldn't have been over twenty-nine. He shrieked, "You!" He called me a million names. He said, "You thieving rat, I'll teach you to try to cheat me out of my candy ration!"

He had a knife.

I didn't care. I didn't have anything and that was stupid, but it didn't matter. I got a bottle of beer from the next table and smashed it against the back of a chair. It made a good weapon, you know; I'd take that against a knife any time.

I ran toward him, and he came all staggering and lurching toward me, looking crazy and desperate, mumbling and raving--I could hardly hear him, because I was talking, too. Nobody tried to stop us. Somebody went out the door and I figured it was to call the cops, but that was all right. Once I took care of Chowderhead, I didn't care what the cops did.

I went for the face.

He cut me first. I felt the knife slide up along my left arm but, you know, it didn't even hurt, only kind of stung a little. I didn't care about that. I got him in the face, and the bottle came away, and it was all like gray and white jelly, and then blood began to spring out. He screamed. Oh, that scream! I never heard anything like that scream. It was what I had been waiting all my life for.

I kicked him as he staggered back, and he fell. And I was on top of him, with the bottle, and I was careful to stay away from the heart or the throat, because that was too quick, but I worked over the face, and I

felt his knife get me a couple times more, and--

And--

* * * * *

And I woke up, you know. And there was Dr. Santly over me with a hypodermic needle that he'd just taken out of my arm, and four male nurses in fatigues holding me down. And I was drenched with sweat.

For a minute, I didn't know where I was. It was a horrible queasy falling sensation, as though the bar and the fight and the world were all dissolving into smoke around me.

Then I knew where I was.

It was almost worse.

I stopped yelling and just lay there, looking up at them.

Dr. Santly said, trying to keep his face friendly and noncommittal, "You're doing much better, Byron, boy. _Much_ better."

I didn't say anything.

He said, "You worked through the whole thing in two hours and eight minutes. Remember the first time? You were sixteen hours killing him. Captain Van Wyck it was that time, remember? Who was it this time?"

"Chowderhead." I looked at the male nurses. Doubtfully, they let go of my arms and legs.

"Chowderhead," said Dr. Santly. "Oh--Roebuck. That boy," he said mournfully, his expression saddened, "he's not coming along nearly as well as you. _Nearly._ He can't run through a cycle in less than five hours. And, that's peculiar, it's usually you he-- Well, I better not say that, shall I? No sense setting up a counter-impression when your pores are all open, so to speak?" He smiled at me, but he was a little worried in back of the smile.

I sat up. "Anybody got a cigarette?"

"Give him a cigarette, Johnson," the doctor ordered the male nurse standing alongside my right foot.

Johnson did. I fired up.

"You're coming along _splendidly_," Dr. Santly said. He was one of these psych guys that thinks if you say it's so, it makes it so. You know that kind? "We'll have you down under an hour before the end of the week. That's _marvelous_ progress. Then we can work on the conscious level! You're doing extremely well, whether you know it or not. Why, in six months--say in eight months, because I like to be conservative--" he twinkled at me--"we'll have you out of here! You'll be the first of your crew to be discharged, you know that?"

"That's nice," I said. "The others aren't doing so well?"

"No. Not at all well, most of them. Particularly Dr. Gilvey. The

run-throughs leave him in terrible shape. I don't mind admitting I'm worried about him."

"That's nice," I said, and this time I meant it.

* * * * *

He looked at me thoughtfully, but all he did was say to the male nurses, "He's all right now. Help him off the table."

It was hard standing up. I had to hold onto the rail around the table for a minute. I said my set little speech: "Dr. Santly, I want to tell you again how grateful I am for this. I was reconciled to living the rest of my life confined to one part of the country, the way the other crews always did. But this is much better. I appreciate it. I'm sure the others do, too."

"Of course, boy. Of course." He took out a fountain pen and made a note on my chart; I couldn't see what it was, but he looked gratified. "It's no more than you have coming to you, Byron," he said. "I'm grateful that I could be the one to make it come to pass."

He glanced conspiratorially at the male nurses. "You know how important this is to me. It's the triumph of a whole new approach to psychic rehabilitation. I mean to say our heroes of space travel are entitled to freedom when they come back home to Earth, aren't they?"

"Definitely," I said, scrubbing some of the sweat off my face onto my sleeve.

"So we've got to end this system of designated areas. We can't avoid the tensions that accompany space travel, no. But if we can help you eliminate harmful tensions with a few run-throughs, why, it's not too high a price to pay, is it?"

"Not a bit."

"I mean to say," he said, warming up, "you can look forward to the time when you'll be able to mingle with your old friends from the rocket, free and easy, without any need for restraint. That's a lot to look forward to, isn't it?"

"It is," I said. "I look forward to it very much," I said. "And I know exactly what I'm going to do the first time I meet one--I mean without any restraints, as you say," I said. And it was true; I did. Only it wouldn't be a broken beer bottle that I would do it with.

I had much more elaborate ideas than that.

--PAUL FLEHR

Transcriber's Note:

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typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MERCHANTS OF VENUS ***

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The MERCHANTS Of Venus

By A. H. PHELPS, Jr.

Illustrated by FREAS

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from Galaxy Science Fiction March 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

[Sidenote: _A pioneer movement is like a building--the foundation is never built for beauty!_]

The telephone rang. Reluctantly, Rod Workham picked it up. Nothing good had come from that phone in six years, and his sour expression was almost an automatic reflex.

"Workham here," he said.

He held the phone an inch away from his ear, but the tirade exceeded his expectations--it would have been audible a foot away:

"Workham! How long do you think we're going to stand for this! At the rate you're going, there won't be a man left on Venus or a dollar in the budget! What kind of a personnel director are you? Don't you know this

project is vital to every person on Earth? Thirty more resignations came in on this last mail flight."

Rod put the receiver gently on his desk. General Carlson raved and ranted this way every time a colonist quit, and Rod knew he was not expected to answer, even if given the chance. The general would carry on for about five minutes and then would slam down the phone himself.

He dialed another number on the other phone.

"This is Rod, Dave," he said when he got an answer. "Carlson is on the other phone, yelling at my desk blotter. He says thirty more resignations came in just now. That right?"

"Close enough, Rod--twenty-three pulled out. That makes seventy-eight per cent resigned in less than--"

"Spare me the statistics--Carlson's probably blating them right now. How do they break down? Are they mostly farmers or technicians?"

"There were only nine technicians left, and all of them quit with this bunch. The rest were farmers." Dave Newson must be smoking his pipe, Rod decided--grinding sounds were coming over the phone. "That doesn't leave very much on Venus to start a colony with--a few farmers, some trappers. And the scientific personnel--damn it, they seem to stick it out all right--"

"Their contracts are different," Rod reminded him. "They go on a two year hitch and then come back to Earth if they want to. The ones who are there are the ones who can take it and are signed up again."

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There was a speculative pause on the other end of the line. "Say, Rod," Newson said slowly. "Why not leave this last batch of quitters right where they are? Every one of them. They signed up for the project with their eyes open. Why don't you just refuse to bring them home? ... they'd have to make a go of the colony to save their filthy necks!"

Rod grinned nastily. "I'd like to do it--but even General Carlson wouldn't dare. We'd never get another colonist off Earth, once it got out. They wouldn't trust us. Our first problem is to get a self-supporting society on Venus--and that might do it, all right. But our main job is to relieve the crowding on Earth, and that means large numbers of people will have to go willingly later on. If we get tough with these babies, who will take a chance later on that we won't repeat the trick?"

"But we lose a hundred potential colonists every time one of these quitters starts talking about why he left! More harm is done by letting them come back than would result from leaving them where they are." Again the speculative pause. "Maybe you could shoot them on arrival?"

"I'll suggest it to the general when I see him," Rod said, "if he doesn't shoot me first. Now, can you get me the files on this latest group? And I'd like to see the staff psychologist here, along with all the interviewers who handled and passed the group. We'll see what we can salvage out of this. And if you see Jaimie, send him along too, will you? Maybe our gambling historian can find us something useful in the

Project Record."

"The files are already on the way. And I told Biddington you'd probably want to see him--he said he'd be along in about ten minutes. I haven't located all the interviewers yet. Jaimie's been right here, trying to talk me into a game of Nim and protesting he never heard of binary numbers. I'll send him up, but keep your hand on your wallet. If you need anything else, I'll be right here."

* * * * *

Rod thanked him and hung up, shaking his head. Dave Newsom was too good a man to be stuck on a government project--he ought to get out before the trouble started. Anyone who worked for Rod Workham on Project Venus was likely to end up with a bad name. They lived under the ax. The only person who could be sure of his job was Rod himself. He'd been recommended by a committee of top men in his field, and no other personnel man would accept the job if he were removed. Also, most of his men would leave the project if General Carlson bounced him, for they had been telling him so ever since the job had gotten hot.

But there was the danger that the general might decide to bypass Personnel in selecting colonists--or, what was more probable, might try to tame the planet with a military outpost.

Rod could hardly blame the man for his feelings. The job was vital, and everyone was intensely interested in making a go of it. Scientific agriculture had gone about as far as it could; hydroponics had already begun to shoulder the load required by an overpopulated planet. But the fact known to most intelligent people on Earth was that either new room was found in this kind of emergency, some place where people could go and live under nearly the same standards, or else some drastic changes in living standards would be required of all. And absolute and rigidly enforced birth control would have to go into effect. And all the attendant causes for race wars, nationalist wars, and have-not wars would crop up.

But the majority of the people wouldn't move to an undeveloped planet. You couldn't send ordinary citizens as pioneers. For one thing, they wouldn't want to go. For another, the new community wouldn't last long if you forced them to go--the average person had neither the attitudes nor the physique needed to make over a wilderness.

The problem was to find people who would create a community on a new planet and develop an integrated society there. This had meant rigid selection, careful psychological preparation and a terrifically expensive transportation system to get the people there and keep them supplied. And the job had to be done soon. Economists predicted that thirty years were left on Earth under present standards, maybe fifty. If the population couldn't be thinned out one way by then, it would have to be done by another.

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For six years, now, Rod had worked on the job of establishing a self-supporting colony on Venus. Three different colonies had been started, and each had died out in less than two years. Resignations would come in slowly at first, and then in a rush, until only twenty or thirty people would be left, of which the majority would be short-term

scientific teams. By the terms of the colonists' contracts no man could be left on Venus more than a month after his resignation; so the bulk of two colonies had simply had to be shipped back to Earth, and plans made for another try.

And now the third colony was quitting, rushing home, leaving nothing on the jungle planet but a few small clearings soon to be taken over by the vegetation.

Several times in the last year Rod had thought of volunteering himself; but he knew it for a futile gesture. He wasn't five hundred men. He didn't even have the special skills or physique that were needed.

His gloomy thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the men.

Biddington was first. Then in twos and threes came the interviewers, all looking like the home team at the half, three touchdowns behind and just waiting for their coach.

If psychologists made good colonists, Rod thought, here would be a dozen more volunteers.

The arrival of Homer Jaimison brought the only cheerful face in the group. The project historian was a young man, just over thirty, and considerably over six feet. He wore the expression of a man who is itching to do something. Jaimie had never really been busy yet on the project--the colonies had died out so quickly that his work had been mostly clerical, and he'd had to fill in time as best he could. So far he had done it making up improbable contests of skill for drinks, with such a weird assortment of shifting rules and scoring that he hadn't paid for a drink since his arrival. He made a valuable contribution to the project, however, since he helped to keep the group's minds off their troubles a part of the time.

Rod genuinely liked Jaimie, and expected to miss him strongly when Venus became self-supporting to the point where the historian would have to complete his work in residence.

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When they were all seated, Rod leaned against his desk and said, "I can see you all know why we're here. To begin with, I'm not going to accuse anyone of mistakes. Each of you is the best possible man in the country for his job. If you weren't, you wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have asked for you; and General Carlson wouldn't have kept you. So there's nothing to feel bad about. If you can't do this work, no one can. Self-recrimination is foolish when you've been put on an impossible problem. I didn't call you in to bawl you out, but to ask you if we should continue spending project funds for nothing."

Jaimie raised his eyebrows at this speech, but said nothing.

"What do you mean, impossible problem?" one of the interviewers objected. "We know what we need--it's just that we're still making some mistake in selection that we haven't corrected."

"That's right, Rod." Biddington, the project psychologist, took up the dissension. "We know something is wrong with the selection techniques, or in the personality patterns we consider necessary. But it's only a

problem of finding out what it is. The problem is by no means insoluble."

"As long as you're not ready to give us up," another interviewer said, "we aren't going to quit."

"You can't afford to get defeatist about this, Rod," Biddington went on. "This project is too important to fail. Whether you like it or not, your experience is too valuable for you to back out."

Rod grinned and held up his hands. "All right. That's the reaction I wanted. If you all still think we can get somewhere, we may as well try to analyze this last group." He sat down at his desk. "I have the files here, along with the tapes of the interviews. Let's see what difference we can find between those who hung on this long, and the ones that quit after the first three months."

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The group settled down to trying to differentiate between a man who couldn't do a job but could try for six months longer than the next. They took the colonists carefully apart, trait by trait, and put them all back. They reviewed the colonists' records from birth, and compared them in endless combinations. Jaimie came into the discussion to show what the status of the colonies had been at the time each colonist had resigned: what diseases had been encountered when one man quit; how much jungle had been cleared before another did.

Files came and went in a continuous flux; coffee and sandwiches came and grew cold and stale. The air became gray with smoke.

Nothing.

The same results had come out of every investigation: You needed a man who was unstable to get him to leave Earth. You needed a man who was stable to have him stay on Venus. You needed initiative and resourcefulness to survive on a new planet. You needed a man who had so little initiative and resourcefulness that the competition on Earth wouldn't be profitable. You needed a young, healthy, vigorous specimen. You needed an older, experienced, more mature person.

You needed A and you needed non-A.

And even if you found people with the factors balanced just right, assuming you knew what the balance should be, where did you find five hundred of them?

The discussion went on. The solutions got wilder and more absurd. Take whole orphan asylums and bring them up on Venus under military guard. Build a development in the steamiest, nastiest jungle, and test recruits for the colony there. Send African natives.

The men were beginning to make the whole thing look impossible again, so Rod decided to call a halt until they could get a better perspective. Tired himself, he dismissed them. They left quietly, not arguing in little groups or mumbling half-formed ideas to themselves, the way a team that has been progressing will do.

* * * * *

Only Jaimie stayed. He remained sitting hunched up near the desk, in the same position he'd held for the last hour. When the others had all left, he grinned at Rod.

"You know, for a group of practicing psychologists, this is the softest bunch of suckers I've seen."

"You've proved that to your own profit several times so far," Rod answered, rubbing his face as though smoothing the wrinkles could remove the tension. "Who have you robbed lately?"

"I'm talking about your performance just now. Here comes the whole crew, walking in with their heads hanging to the floor. Every last man was ready to tell you he was quitting--that the problem was insoluble. And before anyone can say a word, you tell them that the whole thing is impossible and imply that you want to quit. Even Biddington fell for it. You can't back out now, Rod, they say. Let's not have defeatist talk out of you, of all people--"

"I did feel that way," Rod said. "I'm just about ready to quit. I think that whatever our mistake has been, we can't do any better than we have. We just don't know enough."

Jaimie wasn't grinning now. "What will happen if you quit?"

"My guess is that Carlson will set up a military outpost there. Make a clearing, build a fort, maybe a town. Then he'll try to get people to come and live in it." Rod sighed. "It won't work. They'll want to know why the planet had to be colonized that way--why wouldn't the first colonists stay?"

"I agree. The military outpost is a fine method for spreading a culture to an existing civilization. Rome did much for Europe that way; the most powerful cities sprang up near the Roman forts and roads. But as a method for inducing the populace to a new place, it doesn't work. A free people will not willingly move into a military township." Jaimie looked sharply at Rod. "So what do you intend to do--run out and turn it all over to Carlson?"

"I don't know, Jaimie. I just don't know. Six years is a long time."

"Damn it, Rod, you had much worse jobs than this one in industry! How did you select a computer man, a communications man, an engineering physicist, out of a group of men with similar backgrounds? It seems to me a harder problem than this."

"We don't really know much, as I said," Rod said. "Ours has often been an imitation science. When we had to select a computer man, we just gave a battery of tests to successful computer men--structural vision, vocabulary, tri-dimensional memory, ink-blots, syllogisms, practically everything. Then we weeded out the tests whose scores appeared to have no statistical relevance. Any future computer man had to duplicate those results, whatever they were. If we had a recently pioneered civilization around, Jaimie, you'd find this whole staff running through it like pollsters before an election."

"What was all this talk about balance, instability, initiative and all the rest?" asked Jamie.

"That's what we do when we don't know, Jaimie. We try to predict what we need; then we try to find ways of finding it in people."

* * * * *

Jaimie made an explosive sound. "But I thought you must have progressed from empirical methods! I would have said something long ago, if I hadn't thought you knew what you were doing all the time!" The historian was on his feet, stalking about the room. "Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"Why? What difference would it have made?" Rod frowned, failing to understand the other's excitement. "Sure, we've progressed from the older methods, in that we now have pretty complete data for all present job descriptions. And we can synthesize data for a new job, if it's not too different. But there isn't any information on the kind of person needed in a new world. What the devil are you getting so upset about?"

The historian threw himself into a chair and glared at Rod. "If you couldn't find the kind of people you needed to test, you could have asked a historian if he knew anything about them!"

Rod shook his head puzzledly. "Subjective data, such as that--"

"Don't bring subjectivity into this, damn it! We get enough of that from physical scientists." Jaimie held himself in the chair, almost shaking with the intensity of his feeling. "Look, Rod, you know I want to see the project succeed. And you admit that you haven't got an answer. Well, baby, I think I have! It's an idea that has about a fifty-fifty chance of being right in this case ... would you be willing to try it?"

"If I had been betting on your side for the last few months, I'd be several dollars richer," Rod smiled. "Yes, I think I might go along with your idea, if you can convince me it has an even chance for success. Three failures out of three tries makes for poorer odds than that. What do you have in mind?"

"H'm," Jaimie said. "I imagine your stock isn't so high with old scabbard and blade right now, is it?"

Rod laughed. "I don't think he'll shoot on sight, but I'm not positive enough to stand in front of a lighted window."

"Well, then--if I had an idea you agreed with, the surest way to kill it would be to have you present it to him, right? And if you fight it, that's sure to convince Carlson!" Jaimie thought hard for a moment, tapping the chair-arm. "Rod, I have to do something you aren't going to like. Do you trust me?"

"You mean you're going to try this without even discussing it with the personnel group?"

"That's right. If I don't tell you what I'm doing, I know you'll fight it. And I'll need that kind of help from you to push Carlson into doing it.

"But I have to do something far worse than that, Rod. I'm going to tell the general that you knew my plan from the start, and have been sitting

on it because I'm not a psychologist. I'm going to ruin your reputation with the worst set of lies since the Red purges. I'll say you're fighting me, because you can't accept an idea that came from a man outside of your own group. If the scheme doesn't work you'll be ruined, because there'll be no way to retract the lies. If it does work, we can announce that we put on an act to sell the plan to Carlson. Can you take it?"

Rod was thoughtful for a few minutes. He liked and trusted Jaimie, but the man had no experience in this field--and this sounded like an all-or-nothing shot.

Then he remembered his despair over the latest set of resignations. He'd been ready to quit--he had nothing to offer, and neither did his men. Even a wild idea was worth a try, he thought grimly--he would be risking nothing but a plan that had already failed.

"Go to it, boy," he said. "And if you need a fight, you'll get a damn good one."

* * * * *

The fight with Carlson was short, and Rod was abruptly overruled. After that Jaimie moved fast. The new colonists flocked in. Three months after Rod's talk with him, the compounds started to fill. A shipload was a hundred men, and each new man had to wait in a group until it was filled. But there was no waiting now except for processing; the compounds were full before the ships were ready.

Rod had paid no attention to Jaimie's recruiting methods, thinking that the historian's idea differed mainly in control over the colonists.

Until he saw the crowds.

Even from a distance, they didn't have the young look of the previous groups. Up close, they looked like the sweepings of the slums.

[Illustration]

He and Biddington talked to a few before they fully realized what Jaimie had done. All the men were sure that Venus was a mineral paradise--gold in the streams, uranium lodes so pure you had to wear a shield to get near them, diamonds, silver--every treasure that had ever excited men on Earth was scattered around the new world waiting to be picked up. That was what Jaimie had told them.

Rod got to a phone, fast.

"Jaimie, you fool! I know what you're doing, and I won't put up with it! You've told these dupes they can get rich on Venus! You intended to attract large numbers of recruits, in the hope that some of them will be what we need--but look at what you attracted! Crooks, gangsters, bums, hoboese, sharecroppers and I don't know what. You got recruits all right ... but what the hell kind of a society are you going to start with them! And who will go and live there among them later?"

"What's the matter, Workham?" Jaimie asked coldly. "Are you a racial purist? Want only your kind of people to get to Venus?"

"I don't care _who_ goes, as long as they fit some standards. But to make a decent place, you need decent people--morally clean and healthy. Not this collection of mental cripples, alcoholics and thieves. Probably half of them are wanted men!"

He argued further, unable to believe that this was Jaimison's great fifty-fifty chance. He said many things ... and regretted every one; for that night the telecasts carried a recorded version of his outburst. Jaimie had maneuvered him into saying things he didn't quite mean, so that it looked as if he was trying to hide the all good things on Venus and save them for his own friends. One commentator said outright that if you weren't a college graduate recommended by one of Workham's friends, it would cost you a thousand dollars to get on an outgoing ship. By the next morning, half the papers in the world were after Workham's scalp.

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Rod could only take the abuse and grind his teeth. How did you fight a thing like that? You were condemned if you kept silent, and if you answered, people nodded their heads and said, "See--he's still trying to deny it."

The failures from the old colonies were Rod's only allies. They tried to tell people what Venus was like, and what lies Carlson and his stooge Jaimison were using for bait. But it was pointed out that these men naturally had a stake in the secret ... and, after all, everyone knew how well off the returning colonists were! This was actually due to the high premium paid to get men to go to the planet, but no one believed.

Days passed. Weeks. The compounds filled, and emptied, and filled again. People stood in lines to apply. They walked miles to appear at a recruiting center. They fought for a place on the next ship, or the one after that. Farmers, clerks, ragged families, hoboes, armed men, teen-age boys and old men. Four thousand people applied in the first few months and were shipped out. Then the crowds thinned, even though the Get Rich propaganda continued. Soon, only a few hundred appeared where there had been thousands; then twos and threes; at last only a dozen or so a day, many of whom changed their minds before the full shipload had been assembled.

Rod clung to his job throughout. He had little to do, though his department had never been formally discontinued. Sooner or later, he knew, their services would be needed--when this cheap trick had failed. So he and his staff remained. Studying old files, making up test batteries, discussing survival factors, they readied themselves for the project again. From time to time they interviewed and tested a few of those waiting in the compounds. There was too much time to just sit around--even this activity was a welcome diversion.

As the year passed, the number of prospective colonists stopped decreasing and held steady at about five a day. But slowly something else changed. Among the new arrivals there began to appear engineers who had tossed up good jobs to emigrate, farmers with their families, school-teachers, storekeepers, lawyers, even doctors. All of them young. Not in any great number; but their appearance was a surprise still. Then there came two former colonists who had resigned on one of the earlier attempts, now trying to get back to Venus without inducement of bonus, high pay or guaranteed return.

That was the day Rod decided to call on Jaimie.

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"I have here a bottle of eight-year-old rye, Jaimie," he began. "I think you're entitled to a drink, and I'm entitled to an explanation. Want to swap?"

"Rod!" Jaimie's bony face lit up. "It's good to see you. I've been afraid to call you until we could admit to the hoax. Come in, come in."

"Well, you did it," Rod said, after they had settled down. "I met two former colonists in the compound today. They know there isn't gold on Venus, and still they want to go out for free. No contract. And lately we've been getting professional people. There was even a kid fresh out of journalism school who wants to start up a paper. Jaimie, how did you do it? Were we so far wrong as that?"

"You did it yourself, Rod. You told me how--but you wouldn't have believed, then. Or if you had, we never would have sold it to Carlson. Remember, you said if there were only a recent pioneer civilization around, you'd run to them with ink-blots and vocabulary tests? All you needed to do was duplicate the kind of person who settled America or Australia or California.

"Well, as a historian I knew those people. And I knew what brought them. So I merely put out the same kind of bait."

"The same kind of bait!" Rod exclaimed. "What about freedom of religion and freedom from oppression? Isn't that what brought people to this country? There's no oppression to flee from these days! And even if it was the same bait, why weren't the same kind of people attracted? You saw that first compound full--where in that cesspool was Thomas Paine, or Franklin, or Miles Standish?"

"Franklin was born here," Jaimie grinned. "Paine didn't come over in the first wave. And I suppose General Carlson was Miles Standish. Maybe that kid journalist you saw was Paine's counterpart. No, Rod--the bait I held out attracted the same kind of people initially as it always has. You have been compromising all along on the factors you really wanted in order to get young, healthy, moral people to Venus. The answer is simply this: Pioneers are not necessarily young, healthy, or moral. So you didn't get what you wanted.

"You see, America wasn't only founded by pilgrims. They were actually a minority here. We were settled by promoters, trappers, bonded servants, exiled British deportees, pickpockets and thieves. We were explored by French and Spanish pirates. The better element in Europe didn't come here at first--why should they? It was dangerous. Pioneering was to the advantage of the worst elements. They came by court order, out of necessity, for adventure. They came for gold more than for freedom; for a new chance more than for a new religion.

"Australia was set up as a penal colony. Others went there for gold, or to start over where they weren't known. That's the kind of person who settles a new land--the misfits: too impulsive, drunkards, weaklings, convicts, and fugitives from justice. Too sick in mind and body to make a go of it where they are.

"So we announced that there was a brand new world with a new chance for everyone on it. We implied that there was wealth. We told them everything about Venus that brought the English to America, the Spanish to South America, the Easterners to the West, and the Middlewesterners to California. We didn't hunt for pioneers. They came to us."

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Rod refilled his glass thoughtfully. "But what kind of a society will men like that create? A fighting, lawless structure...."

"That's right. And the lawless will eliminate themselves by their very activities. Like the early West. While the doctors come in to treat wounds, and the lawyers to plead their cases; while their wives and the other wives will start schools and bring in school-teachers. That society will purge itself, Rod--many of the worst will become good citizens out of meeting the challenge of a new planet, and the rest will disappear."

"Well, then, what about the gold story?" Rod asked. "Won't they be angry with everyone connected with the project because of the hoax?"

"That was a little raw, but no worse than other gold rushes--few of the stampedeers ever found the gold they went after. The captain of one of the rockets told me that the first few months the colonists were trying to stow away on the returning ships. Now they send messages to friends and relatives to come before the opportunity is gone--that's why you've seen this better element. Our lies will soon be forgotten, and crops and foods and minerals will be coming from Venus, and better people will go to meet the diminished challenge on our brave new world."

Rod stood up. "Well, my compliments for a job well done, Jaimie. When do you expect to go and live there yourself? You'll have to soon, won't you, to complete the Project Record in residence?"

Jaimie nodded. "About six months from now, I think. Why?"

"Good," Rod exclaimed. "We can all go together."

"What are you planning to do? Volunteer?"

"The whole personnel staff will be going. Here's just what we need--a young pioneer society! We can get adequate data for future selection, a better idea of what kind of person a colony needs at different stages of growth." Rod grinned. "After all, your method was pretty sloppy, even if it did work. And you sent far too many wrong people. Once we have some good data ... anything you can do, we can do better!"

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THE PASSENGER
By KENNETH HARMON

The classic route to a man's heart is through his stomach—and she was just his dish.
Illustrated by CONNELL

The transport swung past Centaurus on the last leg of her long journey to Sol. There was no flash, no roar as she swept across the darkness of space. As silent as a ghost, as quiet as a puff of moonlight she moved, riding the gravitational fields that spread like tangled, invisible spider webs between the stars.

Within the ship there was also silence, but the air was stirred by a faint, persistent vibration from the field generators. This noiseless pulse stole into every corner of the ship, through long, empty passageways lined with closed stateroom doors, up spiraling stairways to the bridge and navigational decks, and down into vast and echoing holds, filled with strange cargo from distant worlds.

This vibration pulsed through Lenore's stateroom. As she relaxed on her couch, she bathed in it, letting it flow through her to tingle in her fingertips and whisper behind her closed eyelids.

"Home," it pulsed, "you're going home."

She repeated the word to herself, moving her lips softly but making no sound. "Home," she breathed, "back home to Earth." Back to the proud old planet that was always home, no matter how far you wandered under alien suns. Back to the shining cities clustered along blue seacoasts. Back to the golden grainlands of the central states and the high, blue grandeur of the western mountains. And back to the myriad tiny things that she remembered best, the little, friendly things ... a stretch of maple-shadowed streets heavy and still with the heat of

a summer noon; a flurry of pigeons in the courthouse square; yellow dandelions in a green lawn, the whir of a lawnmower and the smell of the cut grass; ivy on old bricks and the rough feel of oak bark under her hands; water lilies and watermelons and crepe papery dances and picnics by the river in the summer dusk; and the library steps in the evening, with fireflies in the cool grass and the school chimes sounding the slow hours through the friendly dark.

She thought to herself, "It's been such a long time since you were home. There will be a whole new flock of pigeons now." She smiled at the recollection of the eager, awkward girl of twenty that she had been when she had finished school and had entered the Government Education Service. "Travel While Helping Others" had been the motto of the GES.

She had traveled, all right, a long, long way inside a rusty freighter without a single porthole, to a planet out on the rim of the Galaxy that was as barren and dreary as a cosmic slag heap. Five years on the rock pile, five years of knocking yourself out trying to explain history and Shakespeare and geometry to a bunch of grubby little miners' kids in a tin schoolhouse at the edge of a cluster of tin shacks that was supposed to be a town. Five years of trudging around with your nails worn and dirty and your hair chopped short, of wearing the latest thing in overalls. Five years of not talking with the young miners because they got in trouble with the foreman, and not talking with the crewmen from the ore freighters because they got in trouble with the first mate, and not talking with yourself because you got in trouble with the psychologist.

They took care of you in the Education Service; they guarded your diet and your virtue, your body and your mind. Everything but your happiness.

There was lots to do, of course. You could prepare lessons and read papers and cheap novels in the miners' library, or nail some more tin on your quarters to keep out the wind and the dust and the little animals. You could go walking to the edge of town and look at all the pretty gray stones and the trees, like squashed-down barrel cactus; watch the larger sun sink behind the horizon with its little companion star circling around it, diving out of sight to the right and popping up again on the left. And Saturday night—yippee!—three-year-old movies in the tin hangar. And, after five years, they come and say, "Here's Miss So-and-So, your relief, and here's your five thousand credits and wouldn't you like to sign up for another term?"

Ha!

So they give you your ticket back to Earth. You're on the transport at last, and who can blame you if you act just a little crazy and eat like a pig and take baths three times a day and lie around your stateroom and just dream about getting home and waking up in your own room in the morning and getting a good cup of real coffee at the corner fountain and kissing some handsome young fellow on the library steps when the Moon is full behind the bell tower?

"And will the young fellow like you?" she asked herself, knowing the answer even as she asked the question.

She whirled about in the middle of the stateroom, her robe swirling around her, and ended with a deep curtsy to the full-length mirror.

"Allow me to introduce myself," she murmured. "Lenore Smithson, formerly of the Government Education Service, just back from business out on the Rim. What? Why, of course you may have this dance. Your name? Mr. Fairheart! Of the billionaire Fairhearts?" She waltzed with herself a moment. Halting before the mirror again, she surveyed herself critically.

"Well," she said aloud, "the five years didn't completely ruin you, after all. Your nose still turns up and your cheeks still dimple when you smile. You have a nice tan and your hair's grown long again. Concentrated food hasn't hurt your figure, either." She turned this way and that before the mirror to observe herself.

Then suddenly she gave a little gasp of surprise and fright, for a cascade of laughter had flooded soundlessly inside her head.

She stood frozen before the mirror while the laughter continued. Then she slowly swung around. It ceased abruptly. She looked around the compartment, staring accusingly at each article of furniture in turn; then quickly spun around to look behind her, meeting her own startled gaze in the mirror.

Opening the door slowly, she ventured to thrust her head out into the corridor. It was deserted, the long rows of doors all closed during the afternoon rest period. As she stood there, a steward came along the corridor with a tray of glasses, nodded to her, and passed on out of sight. She turned back into the room and stood there, leaning against the door, listening.

Suddenly the laughter came again, bursting out as though it had been suppressed and could be held back no longer. Clear, merry, ringing and completely soundless, it poured through her mind.

"What is it?" she cried aloud. "What's happening?"

"My dear young lady," said a man's voice within her head, "allow me to introduce myself. My name is Fairheart. Of the billionaire Fairhearts. May I have the next dance?"

"This is it," she thought. "Five years on the rock pile would do it to anyone. You've gone mad."

She laughed shakily. "I can't dance with you if I can't see you."

"I really should explain," the voice replied, "and apologize for my silly joke. It was frightfully rude to laugh at you, but when I saw you waltzing and preening yourself, I just couldn't help it. I'm a telepath, you see, from Dekker's star, out on the Rim."

That would explain, she thought, his slightly stilted phraseology; English was apparently not his native tongue—or, rather, his native thought.

"There was a mild mutation among the settlers there, and the third generation all have this ability. I shouldn't use it, I know, but I've been so lonely, confined here to my room, that I cast around to see if there were anyone that I could talk to. Then I came upon you considering your own virtues, and you were so cute and funny that I couldn't resist. Then I laughed and you caught me."

"I've heard of telepaths," she said doubtfully, "though I've never heard of Dekker's star. However, I don't think you have any right to go thinking around the ship spying on people."

"Sh!" whispered the silent voice. "You needn't shout. I'll go away if you wish and never spy on you again, but don't tell Captain Blake, or he'll have me sealed in a lead-lined cell or something. We're not supposed to telepath around others, but I've been sitting here with all sorts of interesting thoughts just tickling the edges of my mind for so long that I had to go exploring."

"Why not go exploring on your own two feet like anyone else? Have you so much brains, your head's too heavy to carry?"

"Unfortunately," the voice mourned, "my trouble is in my foot and not in my head. On the second night out from Dekker's star, I lost my footing on the stairs from the dining hall and plunged like a comet to the bottom. I would probably have been killed but for the person of a stout steward who, at that moment, started to ascend the stairs. He took the full impact of my descent on his chest and saved my life, I'm sure. However, I still received a broken ankle that has given me so much pain that I have been forced to remain in my cabin."

"I have had no one to talk to except the steward who brings me my meals, and, as he is the one whom I met on the stairs, he has little to say. In the morning he frowns at me, at noon he glowers, and in the evening he remarks hopefully, 'Foot still pretty bad?' Thus, I'm starved for conversation."

Lenore smiled at this earnest speech. "I might talk with you for a minute or two, but you must admit that you have one advantage over me. You can see me, or so you say, and know what I look like, but I can't see you. It isn't fair."

"I can show myself to you," he said, "but you'll have to help me by closing your eyes and concentrating very hard."

She closed her eyes and waited expectantly. There was a moment of darkness; then there appeared in the

middle of the darkness a point of light, a globe, a giant balloon of color. Suddenly she was looking into the corner of a stateroom which appeared to hang in space. In the center of the area stood a handsome young man in a startling black and orange lounging robe, holding on to the back of a chair.

She opened her eyes; for an instant the vision of the young telepath hung in the air over her couch like a ghostly double exposure. Then it faded and the room was empty.

"That's a terrible effort," came his thought, "particularly when I have to balance on one foot at the same time. Well, now are we even?"

Abandoning her post by the door, she moved to the couch and sat down. "I'm really disappointed," she smiled. "I was sure you'd have two heads. But I think you do have nice eyes and a terrible taste in bathrobes." She took a cigarette from her case and lit it carefully. Then she remembered her manners and extended the case to the empty air. "Won't you have one?"

"I certainly would like to. I'm all out of them until the steward brings my dinner. But I'm afraid I'll have to wait, unless you can blow the smoke through the ventilators to me, or unless ... you bring me one?"

Lenore blushed and changed the subject. "Tell me, what do you do all day in your stateroom? Do you read? Do you play the flute? Do you telepath sweet nothings across the light-years to your girl friend on Dekker's star?"

"I'm afraid my telepathic powers are a bit short-ranged to reach Dekker's star," he replied. "Besides, what girl would commune with me through the depths of space when some other young man is calling her from the dancing pavilion? And my musical talents are limited. However, I do read. I brought some books connected with the research I intend to do on Earth for my degree, and I have spent many happy hours poring over the thrilling pages of Extraterrestrial Entomology and Galactic Arachnida."

"I came better prepared than you did," she said. "Perhaps I could lend you some of my books. I have novels, plays, poetry, and one very interesting volume called Progressive Education under Rim Star Conditions. But," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "I must tell you a secret about that last one."

"What is it?"

"I haven't even opened it."

They laughed together, her merriment bubbling aloud in her cabin, his echoing silently inside her mind.

"I haven't time to read a novel," his thought came, "and drama always bored me, but I must confess to a weakness for poetry. I love to read it aloud, to throw myself into a heroic ballad and rush along, spouting grand phrases as though they were my own and feeling for a moment as though I were really striding the streets of ancient Rome, pushing west on the American frontier or venturing out into space in the first wild, reckless, heroic days of rocket travel. But I soon founder. I get swept away by the rhythm, lost in the intricacies of cadence and rhyme, and, when the pace slows down, when the poem becomes soft and delicate and the meaning is hidden behind a foliage of little gentle words, I lose myself entirely."

She said softly, "Perhaps I could help you interpret some verses."

Then she waited, clasping her hands to keep them from trembling with the tiny thrill of excitement she felt.

"That would be kind of you," he said after a pause. "You could read, there, and I could listen, here, and feel what you feel as you read ... or, if you wished ..." Another pause. "Would you care to come down?"

She could not help smiling. "You're too good a mind reader. A girl can't have any secrets any more."

"Now look here," he burst out. "I wouldn't have said anything, but I was so lonely and you're the only friendly person I've come in contact with and ..."

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "Of course I'll come down and read to you. I'd love to. What's your cabin number?"

"It hasn't got a number because—actually I work on this ship so I'm away from the passengers' quarters. But I can direct you easily. Just start down the hall to your left and ..."

"My dear sir," she cried, "just wait a minute! I can't come visiting in my robe, you know; I'll have to change. But while I dress, you must take your spying little thoughts away. If I detect you peeking in here at the wrong moment, I'll run straight to Captain Blake and have him prepare his special lead-lined cell for one unhappy telepath. So you just run along. When I'm ready, I'll call you and you can lead me to your lair."

He thought only the one word, "Hurry," but in the silence after he was gone she fancied she heard her heart echoing him, loud in the stillness.

She laughed gaily to herself. "Now stop acting like a schoolgirl before the Junior Prom. You've got to get busy and wash and dress and comb and brush." And then to her reflection in the mirror: "Aren't you a lucky girl? You're still millions and billions of miles from Earth and it's starting already, and he's going to do research there for some time, and maybe at the university in your home town if you tell him just how nice it is, and he doesn't know any other girls, you'd have an inside track. Now you'd better get going or you'll never be ready."

"For reading poetry, don't you think this dress is just the thing, this nice soft blue one that goes so well with your tan and shows your legs, which are really quite pretty, you know.... And your silver sandals and those silver pins ... just a touch of perfume.... That's right; and now a little lipstick. You do have a pretty smile.... There, that's right. Now stop admiring yourself and let's go."

She moved to the bookshelf, frowning now, considered, selected and rejected. Finally she settled on three slim books bound in russet leather, in glossy plastic, in faded cloth. She took a little purse from the table, put the cigarette case into it. Then, with a laugh, she took one cigarette and slipped it into a tiny pocket on her skirt.

"I really meant to bring you one," she whispered to the empty air, "but wasn't I mean to tease?"

In the corridor, she walked quickly past the rows of closed doors to the tiny refreshment stand at the foot of the dining room stairs. The attendant rose from his stool as she approached, and came to the counter.

"I'd like two frosted starlights, please," she said, "on a tray."

"Two," said the attendant, and nothing more, but his eyebrow climbed up his forehead, hung for a second, then slowly drooped back to normal, as if to say that after all these years he no longer puzzled about a lovely young girl who came around in the middle of a Wednesday rest period, dressed like Saturday night and smelling of perfume, ordering two intoxicating drinks—when she was obviously traveling alone.

Lenore felt a thrill of secret pleasure go through her, a feeling of possessing a delicious secret, a delightful sensation of reckless gaiety, of life stirring throughout the sleepy ship, of a web of secrets and countersecrets hidden from everyone but this unconcerned observer.

She walked back down the corridor, balancing the tray. When a little splashed over the rim of the tall glasses, she took a sip from each, tasting the sweet, cold liquid in her throat.

When she came to the head of the stairs, she realized that she did not even know her telepath's name. Closing her eyes, she said very slowly and distinctly inside her head, "Mr. Fairheart?"

Instantly his thought was with her, overpowering, as breathless as an embrace. "Where are you?"

"At the head of the central stairs."

"Down you go."

She went down the stairs, through more corridors, down more stairs, while he guided her steps. Once she paused to sip again at each glass when the liquid splashed as she was going down. The ice tickled her nose and made her sneeze.

"You live a long way down," she said.

"I've got to be near my charges," he answered. "I told you I work on the ship; I'm a zoologist classifying any of the new specimens of extraterrestrial life they're always picking up. And I always get stuck with the worst quarters on the ship. Why, I can't even call all my suite my own. The whole front room is filled with some sort of ship's gear that my steward stumbles over every meal time."

She went on and on, down and down. "How many flights?" she wondered. "Two or twelve or twenty?" Now, why couldn't she remember? Only four little sips and her mind felt so cloudy. Down another corridor, and what was that funny smell? These passages were poorly ventilated in the lower levels; probably that was what made her feel so dizzy.

"Only one more flight," he whispered. "Only one more."

Down and along and then the door. She paused, conscious of rising excitement, conscious of her beating heart.

Dimly she noticed the sign on the door. "You—you mean whatever it is you're taking care of is in there with you?"

"Don't be frightened," his persuasive thought came. "It can't hurt you. It's locked in a cage."

Then she slid the bolt and turned the handle. Her head hurt for an instant; and she was inside, a blue and silver shadow in the dim anteroom, with the tray in her hand and the books under her arm and her pulse hammering.

She looked around the dim anteroom, at the spidery tangle of orange and black ropes against the left-hand wall; then at the doorway in the right-hand wall with the warm light streaming through. He was standing in the second room, one hand on the chair for support, the other extended toward her. For the first time he spoke aloud.

"Hello, butterfly," he said.

"Hello," she said. She smiled and walked forward into the light. She reached out for his hand.

Then she stopped short, her hand pressed against an impenetrable wall.

She could see him standing there, smiling, reaching for her hand, but there was an invisible barrier between them. Then, slowly, his room began to fade, the light dimmed, his figure grew watery, transparent, vanished. She was standing, staring at the riveted steel bulkhead of a compartment which was lit only by the dim light filtering through the thick glass over the transom.

She stood there frozen, and the ice in the glasses tinkled nervously. Then the tray slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. Icy liquid splashed the silver sandals. In the silent gloom she stood immobile, her eyes wide in her white face, her fist pressed to her mouth, stifling a scream.

Something touched her gently at head and wrist and ankle—all over her body. The web clung, delicate as lace, strong as steel.

Even if she had been able to move, she could not have broken free as the thing against the wall began to clamber down the strands on eight furred legs.

"Hello, butterfly," he said again.

—KENNETH HARMON

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from Galaxy Science Fiction February 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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